

NONFICTION

How the White Working Class Is Being Destroyed

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DEATHS OF DESPAIR AND THE FUTURE OF CAPITALISM

By Anne Case and Angus Deaton

A 43-year-old white man I will call Darin was recently divorced and recovering from a car accident when he was fired from his job in a biscuit factory. “We all have different bottoms,” he explained to me in an interview in a small town in coal country. “I reached mine after I overheard the man I’d always assumed was my real dad introduce me as his stepson. That was my bottom.” Then it was a quart of whiskey a day.

“Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism” is about just such men. But it begins with a larger mystery. Over the last century, Americans’ life expectancy at birth has risen from 49 to 77. Yet in recent years, that rise has faltered. Among white people age 45-54 — or a time many view as the prime of life — deaths have risen. Especially vulnerable are white men without a four-year bachelor’s degree. Curiously, midlife deaths have not climbed in other rich countries, nor, for the most part, have they risen for American Hispanics or blacks. In fact, black people with B.A.s are now more likely to live through midlife than white people without B.A.s.

But generally speaking, aren’t white men privileged? What could be going on? The Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, a 2015 Nobel Prize recipient, say such men are dying of drug overdoses, drink-induced liver disease and suicide — what they call deaths of despair. Their book is a big-picture complement to Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s tragic close-up in “Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope.” Case and Deaton’s book is not so much a page-turner as a page-muller. It is a highly important book.

Midlife deaths from drugs and alcohol (though not suicide) spiked in black communities in the 1980s when, as the sociologist William Julius Wilson has explained, offshoring of factory jobs deprived the blue-collar black man of a well-paid job that offered him a proud role as husband and father in a home he could own. Blacks suffered the first wave of deaths of despair.

In today’s newer, whiter story of despair, access to a B.A. degree has almost come to determine a man’s life story. Increasingly, it predicts joblessness; among whites age 25-54, a woman with a B.A. is more likely to work than a man without one. That degree also increasingly predicts a man’s wage, because earnings for B.A.-haves have gone up over the last decades, while for B.A.-have-nots, they have gone down.

And where might the blue-collar man work? Often for a temp agency or contractor with high turnover, and little employer commitment. So he won’t attend the office Christmas party (there won’t be one) or play on the union baseball team (there is no union). He’s less likely to go to church, organize the Lion’s Club fund-raiser, coach Little League or vote. Most important, four out of 10 such men won’t be coming home to a wife. Many are several girlfriends past the one who is their children’s mother, and a fair number are tragically out of touch with the children themselves.

The surge in drug overdoses has been pushed by criminally irresponsible companies like Purdue Pharma. But drugs fueled a fire already ablaze, the authors note. Because of competition from cheap labor in the global south and robots at home, capitalism is failing the blue-collar man, and while the answer is not to eliminate so-called free enterprise, the authors caution, they say that we urgently need to fix it. In the meantime, “deaths of despair reflect a long-term and slowly unfolding loss of a way of life.” And this loss occurs, we can add, alongside a parallel crisis of a missing public narrative. Its victims are not dying in heroic wars or battling firestorms. One by one, they are dying in solitary shame with pill, alcohol or gun unmentioned in the death notice.

Though repetitive, the prose in “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism” is clear, the style is discursive and the spirit reflects the boundless curiosity that led the two economists to sociology — where they found in the French sociologist Emile Durkheim the key to suicide: loss of community. They might have discovered another useful idea in the psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman’s idea of “loss aversion.” For it’s not those who never had anything who are killing themselves, but those — like these blue-collar white men — who have lost what they once had. In the age of automation, this may lie in store for us all.

One issue this book does not raise is how, at a time of great partisan divide, readers will receive its message. Those on the conservative side might question the idea of deaths of despair since they tend to see addiction and suicide as moral flaws. They might also resist the authors’ steady focus on social class and search instead for more all-encompassing measures of well-being, like G.D.P., which obscure the growing class divide. As for the authors’ call to counter capitalism’s unrestrained impulse to distribute up, the conservative might counter, “Not to worry, benefits will trickle down.”

Readers on the liberal left, on the other hand, are likely to applaud the authors’ many highly thoughtful proposals to counter growing inequality. But while liberals tend to root for the underdog, white males have not been first in line for their sympathy. So one possible source of resistance to this book’s message for them might arise from something else: splitting. This is the tendency to hold apart two apparently incompatible images or ideas, without seeing how the two connect.

Faced with a coal miner suffering black lung disease, or a laid-off factory hand, liberals feel compassion. Faced, on the other hand, with a man in cowboy boots and red MAGA hat, arms defiantly folded, who dismisses climate science and insults overeducated “snowflakes,” many see — and hate — “the enemy.”

Yet what if these are one and the same man? Or almost the same man? What if the man in the red MAGA hat has a brother or high school classmate who died of a heroin overdose? What if his buddy on the road crew drove drunk off an embankment at night and no one called it suicide? What if he fears it’s too late or too expensive to go to college? If we could ask the men in this book, before they swallowed their last pill or swig of whiskey, or fired their last shot, whom it was they would have voted for in 2016, chances are it would have been for that dogged and aggressive great salesman of hope, Donald Trump.

So we’re left with a challenge. The policies the liberal left embraces — affordable B.A.’s, job retraining, fairer taxes, a Green New Deal — are precisely those policies that could best help victims of diseases of despair. Darin got into a rehab program, and generously shared with me the silver token given him to celebrate four years of sobriety. He’s now earned his B.A., and has become a well-regarded counselor in a local prisoner release program — both the sorts of publicly funded projects liberals embrace. While Darin doesn’t wear a MAGA hat, his dearest childhood friend, now an unemployed addict, does. The great problem of this highly important book — and indeed of our current political moment — is how to link together the story of Darin’s friend and the jeering man in the MAGA hat.