



Anne Case A, Deaton A. Deaths of despair and the future of capitalism. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020

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ABSTRACT This review presents the book ‘Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism’ by Anne Case and Angus Deaton. The expression ‘death of despair’ refers to the set of deaths attributed by the authors to alcohol and drug consumption, medication use and suicide. The publication is unique in its affiliation with the school of Emile Durkheim in arguing that death of despair is determined by the nature of individual connections with social institutions, such as religious culture and economic structure. The relevance of the approach has motivated the replication of the investigative model in different contexts to test the hypothesis of American exceptionalism vis-à-vis the epidemic of deaths of despair.

KEYWORDS Death of despair. Suicide. Alcohol. Drug utilization. Mortality.

RESUMO A resenha apresenta o livro ‘Death of despair and the future of capitalism’, de Anne Case e Angus Deaton. A expressão ‘morte por desespero’ refere-se ao conjunto de mortes atribuídas pelos autores ao consumo de álcool e drogas, uso de medicamentos e suicídio. A publicação apresenta como singularidade a filiação à escola de Emile Durkheim ao defender que a morte por desespero é determinada pela natureza das conexões dos indivíduos com as instituições sociais, como a cultura religiosa e a estrutura econômica. A relevância da abordagem tem motivado a replicação do modelo investigativo em diferentes contextos com o objetivo de testar a hipótese do excepcionalismo americano em relação à epidemia de mortes por desespero.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Morte por desespero. Suicídio. Álcool. Uso de medicamento. Mortalidade.

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Introduction

The expression ‘death of despair’ refers to the set of deaths attributed to alcohol and drug use, medication use, and suicide. The topic gained prominence in 2020 following the book ‘Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism’¹ by Anne Case and Angus Deaton about deaths of despair in the United States of America (USA). The publication is unique in its affiliation with the school of Emile Durkheim² in arguing that death of despair is determined by the nature of individual connections with social institutions, such as religious culture and the economic structure.

Durkheim’s reflection was updated in the social sciences by investigations into the influence of economic conditions, anomie, and social mortification on health conditions³⁻⁶. Building on this foundation, economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton revive the Durkheimian perspective when explaining the growing mortality in the US over the last three decades, which has resulted from suicide, alcohol and crack use, and opioid consumption among less educated, or without a university degree, ‘non-Hispanic whites’ in aged 45-54.

Nevertheless, the book slightly departs from the original social science inspired by Durkheim, which views institutions only through social norms. In contrast, traditional normative approaches suggest that people who frequently interact with family, friends, and neighbors, and who participate in churches, civic actions, and clubs, are less likely to suffer deaths of despair than those who are isolated⁶.

Case and Deaton acknowledge that collapsing social norms – especially distancing from religion and libertarian culture – impacted Americans’ search for ‘meaning and comfort’ amid change. Still, their central argument is that ‘economic forces’ since the 1990s have undermined life for the non-Hispanic white working class, fueling an ‘epidemic of deaths of despair’. Although Black workers faced similar economic pressures earlier, the authors clarify that their account chiefly concerns the eroded

foundations of the American world of work post-World War II.

From this perspective, the prolonged decline in wages was one of the fundamental forces affecting less educated Americans. This decline occurred alongside deteriorated job quality, with low pay and suppressed ‘careers’ in large companies due to massive outsourcing. The authors argue that labor degradation defines the idea of exceptionalism in capitalist development in the US within the contemporary context of globalization and technological paradigm shift.

However, they warn that integrating American capitalism into the global economy has not only produced losers. They challenge the false idea, promoted by the far-right – and which helped elect Donald Trump in two elections – that globalization alone caused the decline of labor by devaluing work and replacing it with immigrant labor. They argue that high-income European countries navigated globalization without fostering long-term wage stagnation or epidemics of deaths of despair. They conclude that something unique is happening in the US, especially harmful to the working class.

In ‘Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism’, the American healthcare system is called a calamity compared to that of developed Europe. Globalization in the US has reportedly weakened unions and empowered monopolies and monopsonies more than elsewhere. They point to the massive growth in market power of high-tech companies, such as Apple and Google, which employ few people and achieve extremely high profitability. In short, Case and Deaton affirm that capital concentration in the high-tech sector and pharmaceuticals enables dominant companies to set prices above competitive or regulated levels.

We should underscore that, by bringing to the forefront deaths caused by despair over alcohol consumption, Case and Deaton distance themselves from Durkheim’s conclusions, who did not identify an association between alcoholism and suicide². Similarly, by addressing drug addiction, the book broadens

the boundaries of understanding about social unease in current times. Skillful research into official American epidemiological data reveals the devastating effects of overdose events caused by medical prescription of opioids for pain management and the widespread use of fentanyl. Opioids were the leading cause of death of despair in the US starting in 2010. For example, the authors show that, in 2017, opioids accounted for 58 prescriptions for every 100 Americans, three times the rate in 1999. They attribute the weight of opioid prescriptions in mortality dynamics to the widespread failure of the American healthcare system to regulate the entry of pharmaceutical companies' products into the domestic market. Because of this leniency, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is assessed by the authors as being captured by corporate and professional lobbying. Companies and the medical profession are also directly held accountable for preventable deaths. The authors argue that the drug OxyContin, from Purdue Pharma, should not be approved by the FDA because it causes addiction and death.

The undeniable relevance of the topic to national and global public health has motivated the replication of Case and Deaton's investigative model in different contexts to test the hypothesis of American exceptionalism regarding the epidemic of deaths of despair^{7,8}. Similarly, the bold methodological perspective advocated by the authors has been the subject of recurring, not always friendly, questioning, especially from segments of the biomedical field⁹. The results of these studies and theoretical-methodological debates are stimulating and worth the attention of students, researchers, and managers in the field of Collective Health, given the great contemporary challenges¹⁰, as well as reading the extraordinary book 'Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism'.

Authorship contribution

Costa NR (0000-0002-8360-4832)* is responsible for preparing the manuscript. ■

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