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Introduction

DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

THIS BOOK WAS BORN in a cabin in Montana in the summer of 2014. We spend August each year in the hamlet of Varney Bridge on the Madison River, overlooking the mountains of the Madison Range. We had promised to investigate the link between happiness and suicide, whether it was true that unhappy places—counties, cities, or countries where people report that their lives are going really badly—are also places where suicide is more common. Over the past ten years, Madison County, Montana, has had a suicide rate that is four times that of Mercer County, New Jersey, where we spend the rest of the year. We were curious, especially because we were generally happy in Montana, and others there seemed happy too.

Along the way, we had discovered that suicide rates among middle-aged white Americans were rising rapidly. We found something else that puzzled us. Middle-aged white Americans were hurting in other ways. They were reporting more pain and poorer overall health, not as much as older Americans—health worsens with age, after all—but the gap was closing. Health among the elderly was improving while health among the middle-aged was worsening. We knew that pain could drive people to suicide, so perhaps the two findings were linked?

That was the beginning. As we thought about how to write up our results, we wanted to put the suicides in context. How big a deal was suicide relative to all other deaths, and compared with the big causes like

cancer or heart disease? We went back to the Centers for Disease Control, downloaded the numbers, and made the calculations. To our astonishment, it was not only suicide that was rising among middle-aged whites; it was *all* deaths. Not by much, but death rates are supposed to fall year on year, so even a pause was news, let alone an increase.

We thought we must have hit a wrong key. Constantly falling death rates were one of the best and best-established features of the twentieth century. All-cause mortality is not supposed to increase for *any* large group. There are exceptions, such as the great influenza epidemic at the tail end of the First World War, or mortality from HIV/AIDS among young men thirty years ago. But the steady decrease in death rates, especially in middle age, had been one of the greatest (and most reliable) achievements of the twentieth century, driving up life expectancy at birth not only in the United States but also in other wealthy countries around the world.

What was happening? There were not enough suicides to account for the turnaround in total deaths. We looked at what other causes might be responsible. To our surprise, “accidental poisonings” were a big part of the story. How could this be? Were people somehow accidentally drinking Drano or weed killer? In our (then) innocence, we did not know that “accidental poisonings” was the category that contained drug overdoses, or that there was an epidemic of deaths from opioids, already well established and still rapidly spreading. Deaths from alcoholic liver disease were rising rapidly too, so that the fastest-rising death rates were from three causes: suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease. These kinds of deaths are all self-inflicted, quickly with a gun, more slowly and less certainly with drug addiction, and more slowly still through alcohol. We came to call them “deaths of despair,” mostly as a convenient label for the three causes taken together. Exactly what kind of despair, whether economic, social, or psychological, we did not know, and did not presume. But the label stuck, and this book is an in-depth exploration of that despair.

The book is about these deaths and about the people who are dying. We document what we found then, and what we and others have found since. Other writers, in the press and in a series of fine books, have put

names and faces to the deaths and told the stories behind them. We shall draw on these accounts too. Our own previous work was primarily focused on documenting what was happening, but here we go further and try to follow trails back to the underlying economic and social roots.

Who is dying? When a person dies, a death certificate is filled out, and one of the boxes asks about the deceased's education. Here was another surprise. The increase in deaths of despair was almost all among those without a bachelor's degree. Those with a four-year degree are mostly exempt; it is those without the degree who are at risk. This was particularly surprising for suicide; for more than a century, suicides were generally more common among the educated,¹ but that is not true in the current epidemic of deaths of despair.

The four-year college degree is increasingly dividing America, and the extraordinarily beneficial effects of the degree are a constant theme running through the book. The widening gap between those with and without a bachelor's degree is not only in death but also in quality of life; those without a degree are seeing increases in their levels of pain, ill health, and serious mental distress, and declines in their ability to work and to socialize. The gap is also widening in earnings, in family stability, and in community.² A four-year degree has become *the* key marker of social status, as if there were a requirement for nongraduates to wear a circular scarlet badge bearing the letters *BA* crossed through by a diagonal red line.

In the last half century, America (like Britain and other rich countries) has built a meritocracy that we rightly see as a great achievement. But there is a dark side that was long ago predicted by Michael Young, the British economist and social scientist who invented the term in 1958 and who saw meritocracy as leading to social calamity.³ Those who do not pass the exams and graduate to the cosmopolitan elite do not get to live in the fast-growing, high-tech, and flourishing cities and are assigned jobs threatened by globalization and by robots. The elite can sometimes be smug about their accomplishments, attributing them to their own merit, and dismissive of those without degrees, who had their chance but blew it. The less educated are devalued or even disrespected, are encouraged to think of themselves as losers, and may feel that the system is rigged

against them.⁴ When the fruits of success are as large as they are today, so are the penalties for failing the tests of meritocracy. Young presciently referred to the left-behind group as “the populists” and the elite as “the hypocrisy.”

We tell the story not only of death but of pain and addiction and of lives that have come apart and have lost their structure and significance. For Americans without a bachelor’s degree, marriage rates are in decline, though cohabitation and the fraction of children born out of wedlock continue to rise. Many middle-aged men do not know their own children. They have parted from the woman with whom they once cohabited, and the children of that relationship are now living with a man who is not their father. The comfort that used to come from organized religion, especially from the traditional churches, is now absent from many lives. People have less attachment to work; many are out of the labor force altogether, and fewer have a long-term commitment to an employer who, in turn, was once committed to them, a relationship that, for many, conferred status and was one of the foundations of a meaningful life.

More workers used to belong to a union. Unions help keep wages up and help give workers some control over their workplace and working conditions. In many towns and cities, the union hall was a center of social life. The good wages that once supported the blue-collar aristocracy have largely vanished, and manufacturing has been replaced by service jobs—for example, in healthcare, in food preparation and service, in janitorial and cleaning services, and in maintenance and repair.

Our story of deaths of despair; of pain; of addiction, alcoholism, and suicide; of worse jobs with lower wages; of declining marriage; and of declining religion is mostly a story of non-Hispanic white Americans without a four-year degree. In 2018, the Census Bureau estimated that there were 171 million Americans between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four. Of those, 62 percent were white non-Hispanics, and 62 percent of those did not have a four-year college degree; the less educated white Americans who are the group at risk are 38 percent of the working-age population. The economic forces that are harming labor are common to all working-class Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, but the stories of blacks and whites are markedly different.

In the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans working in inner cities experienced events that, in retrospect, share some features with what happened to working-class whites thirty years later. The first wave of globalization hit blacks particularly hard, and jobs in the central city became scarce for this long-disadvantaged group. Better-educated and more talented blacks deserted the inner cities for safer city neighborhoods or the suburbs. Marriage rates fell as once-marriageable men no longer had work.⁵ Crime rates rose, as did mortality from violence, from drug overdoses in the crack cocaine epidemic, and from HIV/AIDS, which disproportionately affected blacks. Blacks, always the least favored group, had that status reinforced by being the first to experience the downside of a changing national and global economy that was increasingly shedding less skilled workers.

African Americans have long had harder lives than whites. Blacks die younger, today as in the past. Blacks are also less likely to go to college, or to find employment. Those who work earn less than whites on average. Blacks have less wealth, are less likely to own their own home, are more likely to be incarcerated, and more likely to live in poverty. In many but not all of these areas, black lives have improved; since 1970, black education, wages, income, and wealth have risen. From 1970 to 2000, black mortality rates declined by more than those of whites, and they fell in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century while those of working-class whites were rising.

There is less overt discrimination than in 1970. There has been a black president. The large majority who used to think intermarriage was wrong has now become a large majority who thinks it is just fine. Some whites undoubtedly resent the loss of their long-standing white privilege in a way that hurts them but not blacks.⁶ Poor whites, it has long been said, suffered from a racist system that was primarily directed against blacks. Poor whites were co-opted by the rich, who told them that they might not have much, but at least they were white. As Martin Luther King Jr. summarized, “The southern aristocracy took the world and gave the poor white man Jim Crow,” so that when he had no money for food, “he ate Jim Crow, a psychological bird that told him that no matter how bad off he was, at least he was a white man, better than a black man.”⁷ As Jim Crow

weakened, along with other forms of discrimination, working-class whites lost whatever benefits they got from it. More than half of white working-class Americans believe that discrimination against whites has become as big a problem as discrimination against blacks and other minorities, while only 30 percent of white, college-educated Americans agree.⁸ The historian Carol Anderson states that to someone who has “always been privileged, equality begins to look like oppression.”⁹

Black mortality rates remain above those for whites but, in the past three decades, the gap in mortality rates between blacks and whites with less than a bachelor’s degree fell markedly. Black rates, which were more than twice those of whites as late as the early 1990s, fell as white rates rose, closing the distance between them to 20 percent. Since 2013 the opioid epidemic has spread to black communities, but until then, the epidemic of deaths of despair was white.

In the chapters that follow, we document the decline of white working-class lives over the last half century. White non-Hispanics are 62 percent of the working-age population, so understanding their mortality is important in and of itself. The story of what happened to African Americans in the seventies and eighties has been extensively researched and debated,¹⁰ and we have nothing to add to that literature except to note that there are some parallels with whites today. Hispanics are a widely heterogeneous group, defined only by their common language. US mortality trends for Hispanics change with changes in the composition of people who have immigrated—for example, from Mexico, Cuba, or El Salvador; we do not try to tell a coherent story for them.

We describe the social and economic forces that have slowly made working-class lives so much more difficult. One line of argument focuses on a decline in values or on an increasingly dysfunctional culture within the white working class itself.¹¹ There is little doubt that the collapse of social norms about not having children out of wedlock, which seemed so liberating to so many at first, has brought a heavy price in the long term. Young men who thought they could live a life free of commitment found themselves alone and adrift in middle age. The turning away from religion is perhaps a similar force, but it is also possible to think of it as a failure of organized religion to adapt to political and economic change

and to continue to provide meaning and comfort in a changing world. These arguments about social norms are clearly right, but our story is primarily about the external forces that have eaten away the foundations that characterized working-class life as it was half a century ago. There is strong factual evidence against the view that workers brought the calamity on themselves by losing interest in work.

After correction for inflation, the median wages of American men have been stagnant for half a century; for white men without a four-year degree, median earnings lost 13 percent of their purchasing power between 1979 and 2017. Over the same period, national income per head grew by 85 percent. Although there was a welcome turnaround in earnings for the less educated between 2013 and 2017, it is very small compared with the long-term decline. Since the end of the Great Recession, between January 2010 and January 2019 nearly sixteen million new jobs were created, but fewer than three million were for those without a four-year degree. Only fifty-five thousand were for those with only a high school degree.¹²

The prolonged decline in wages is one of the fundamental forces working against less educated Americans. But a simple link to despair from falling material living standards cannot by itself account for what has happened. For a start, the wage decline has come with job decline—from better jobs to worse jobs—with many leaving the labor force altogether because the worse jobs are unattractive, because there are few jobs at all, or because they cannot easily move, or some combination of these reasons. Deterioration in job quality, and detachment from the labor force, bring miseries over and above the loss of earnings.

Many of the jobs that have come with the lower wages do not bring the sense of pride that can come with being part of a successful enterprise, even in a low-ranked position. Cleaners, janitors, drivers, and customer service representatives “belonged” when they were directly employed by a large company, but they do not “belong” when the large company outsources to a business-service firm that offers low wages and little prospect of promotion. Even when workers are doing the same jobs that they did before they were outsourced, they are no longer part of a marquee corporation. As economist Nicholas Bloom memorably puts

it, they are no longer invited to the holiday party.¹³ The days are gone when a janitor for Eastman Kodak could rise through the ranks to become the CEO of a related firm.¹⁴ In some of these jobs, working conditions are closely monitored by software that deprives workers of control or initiative, even compared with the old, and once much hated, assembly lines.¹⁵ Workers, even in dangerous, dirty occupations, such as coal mining, or in low-level employment for famous corporations, could be proud of their roles.

Men without prospects do not make good marriage partners. Marriage rates among less educated whites fell, and more people lost out on the benefits of marriage, of seeing their children grow, and of knowing their grandchildren. A majority of less educated white mothers have currently had at least one child outside marriage. Poorer prospects make it harder for people to build the life that their parents had, to own a home, or to save to send kids to college. The lack of well-paying jobs threatens communities and the services they provide, such as schools, parks, and libraries.

Jobs are not just the source of money; they are the basis for the rituals, customs, and routines of working-class life. Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive. It is the loss of meaning, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community that brings on despair, not just or even primarily the loss of money.

Our account echoes the account of suicide by Emile Durkheim, the founder of sociology, of how suicide happens when society fails to provide some of its members with the framework within which they can live dignified and meaningful lives.¹⁶

We do not focus on economic hardship, though hardship undoubtedly exists. Whites without a college degree are not the poorest group in the US; they are much less likely to be poor than African Americans. Instead, we see the decline in wages as slowly undermining all aspects of people's lives.

Why has the economy been failing the working class? If we are to come up with ideas for change, then we need to know what happened, where to begin, and what sort of policies might make a difference.

Again, we could turn to the failings of the people themselves and argue that, in the modern economy, it is impossible to prosper without a bachelor's degree, and that people should simply get more education. We have nothing against education, and it has certainly become more valuable over time. We would like to see a world in which everyone who can benefit from going to college, and wants to go to college, is able to do so. But we do not accept the basic premise that people are useless to the economy unless they have a bachelor's degree. And we certainly do not think that those who do not get one should be somehow disrespected or treated as second-class citizens.

Globalization and technological change are often held up as the main villains because they have reduced the value of uneducated labor, replacing it with cheaper, foreign labor or cheaper machines. Yet other rich countries, in Europe and elsewhere, face globalization and technological change but have not seen long-term stagnation of wages, nor an epidemic of deaths of despair. There is something going on in America that is different, and that is particularly toxic for the working class. Much of this book is concerned with trying to find out just what that something might be.

We believe that the healthcare system is a uniquely American calamity that is undermining American lives. We shall also argue that in America, more than elsewhere, market and political power have moved away from labor toward capital. Globalization has aided the shift, both weakening unions and empowering employers,¹⁷ and American institutions have helped push this further than elsewhere. Corporations have become more powerful as unions have weakened, and as politics has become more favorable to them. In part, this comes from the phenomenal growth of high-tech firms, such as Apple and Google, that employ few workers for their size and have high profits per worker. This is good for productivity and for national income, but little of the gain is shared by labor, especially by less educated labor. Less positively, consolidation in some American industries—hospitals and airlines are just two of many examples—has brought an increase in market power in some product markets so that it is possible for firms to raise prices above what they would be in a freely competitive market. The rising economic and

political power of corporations, and the declining economic and political power of workers, allows corporations to gain at the expense of ordinary people, consumers, and particularly workers. At its worst, this power has allowed some pharmaceutical companies, protected by government licensing, to make billions of dollars from sales of addictive opioids that were falsely peddled as safe, profiting by destroying lives. More generally, the American healthcare system is a leading example of an institution that, under political protection, redistributes income upward to hospitals, physicians, device makers, and pharmaceutical companies while delivering among the worst health outcomes of any rich country.

As we write, in August 2019, the opioid manufacturers are being held to account in the courts; a judge ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay more than half a billion dollars to the state of Oklahoma. A subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson grew the poppies in Tasmania that were the raw material for almost all the opioids produced in the US. Early reports of a settlement with the worst offender, Purdue, the maker of OxyContin, suggest that the Sackler family, who own the company, may lose it, as well as several billion dollars of their past profit. Yet the aggressive marketing of pharmaceuticals to doctors and patients is still in place, as are the rules whereby the Food and Drug Administration approved the use of what is essentially legalized heroin. Many of those who have followed the opioid scandal see little difference between the behavior of the legalized drug dealers and the illegal suppliers of heroin and cocaine who are so widely despised and condemned.¹⁸

The problems with the healthcare industry go far beyond the opioid scandal. The US spends huge sums of money for some of the worst health outcomes in the Western world. We will argue that the industry is a cancer at the heart of the economy, one that has widely metastasized, bringing down wages, destroying good jobs, and making it harder and harder for state and federal governments to afford what their constituents need. Public purpose and the wellbeing of ordinary people are being subordinated to the private gain of the already well-off. None of this would be possible without the acquiescence—and sometimes enthusiastic participation—of the politicians who are supposed to act in the interest of the public.

Robin Hood was said to have robbed the rich to benefit the poor. What is happening today in America is the reverse of Robin Hood, from poor to rich, what might be called a Sheriff of Nottingham redistribution. Political protection is being used for personal enrichment, by stealing from the poor on behalf of the rich, a process known to economists and political scientists as rent-seeking. It is, in a sense, the opposite of free-market capitalism, and it is opposed by the Left, because of its distributional consequences, and the Right, because it undermines freedom and a truly free market. It is as old as capitalism itself, as Adam Smith knew very well even in 1776. In his *Wealth of Nations*, often seen as the bible of capitalism, Smith noted that while tax laws could be cruel, they were “mild and gentle” in comparison with the laws that the pressure of “our merchants and manufacturers has extorted from the legislature, for the support of their own absurd and oppressive monopolies.” He suggested that “these laws may be said to be all written in blood.”¹⁹ Rent-seeking is a major cause of wage stagnation among working-class Americans and has had much to do with deaths of despair. We shall have much to say about it.

The most common explanations for the decline in living standards of less educated Americans are that globalization has caused factories to close and move to Mexico or China and that automation has displaced workers. These forces are real enough, and they underlie much of our discussion. But, as the experience of other rich countries shows, globalization and automation, which are faced by all, need not reduce wages as has happened in the US, let alone bring an epidemic of death. American healthcare bears much of the blame, as does policy, particularly the failure to use antitrust to combat market power, in labor markets perhaps even more than goods markets, and to rein in the rent-seeking by pharma, by healthcare more generally, and by banks and many small- or medium-size business entrepreneurs, such as doctors, hedge fund managers, the owners of sports franchises, real estate businesspeople, and car dealers. All of these get rich from the “oppressive monopolies” and special deals, tax breaks, and regulations that they have “extorted from the legislature.” The very top ranks of the American income distribution, the top 1 percenters and top tenth of 1 percenters, are less likely to be corporate

heads than they are to be entrepreneurs who run their own businesses,²⁰ many of whom are protected by rent-seeking.

Inequality is much cited for its baleful impacts. In this book, we see inequality as a consequence as much as a cause; if the rich are allowed to enrich themselves through unfair processes that hold down wages, and raise prices, then inequality will certainly rise. But not everyone gets rich that way. Some people invent new tools, drugs, or gadgets, or new ways of doing things, and benefit many, not just themselves. They profit from improving and extending other people's lives. It is good for great innovators to get rich. Making is not the same as taking. It is not inequality itself that is unfair but rather the process that generates it.

The people who are being left behind care about their own falling living standards and loss of community, not about Jeff Bezos (of Amazon) or Tim Cook (of Apple) being rich. Yet when they think the inequality comes from cheating or from special favors, the situation becomes intolerable. The financial crisis has much to answer for. Before it, many believed that the bankers knew what they were doing and that their salaries were being earned in the public interest. Afterward, when so many people lost their jobs and their homes, and the bankers continued to be rewarded and were not held to account, American capitalism began to look more like a racket for redistributing upward than an engine of general prosperity.

We do not think that taxation is the solution to rent-seeking; the right way to stop thieves is to stop them stealing, not to raise their taxes.²¹ We need to stop the abuse and overprescription of opioids, not tax the profits. We need to correct the process, not try to fix the outcomes. We need to make it easier for foreign doctors to qualify to practice in the US. We need to stop bankers and real estate dealers writing regulations and tax laws in their own interests. The problem for less educated people is stagnant and declining wages, not inequality in and of itself, and indeed much inequality is the consequence of forcing down wages in order to enrich a minority. Reducing rent-seeking would do much to reduce inequality. When the owners of a pharmaceutical company get fabulously rich from the high prices, extended patents, approvals, and convenient regulations that their lobbyists have persuaded the government to grant,

they greatly contribute to inequality, both by pushing down the real incomes of those who have to pay for the drugs and by pushing up the highest incomes at the top of the distribution. The same is true of the bankers who rewrote bankruptcy law in their favor and against borrowers; as one commentator noted, “Never before in our history has such a well-organized, well-orchestrated, and well-financed campaign been run to change the balance of power between creditors and debtors.”²²

As is often noted, even confiscatory taxes on the rich do not provide much relief for the poor, because there are so many poor people and so few rich people. In today’s world, however, we need to think about the process working in the other direction—that squeezing even small amounts out of each of a large number of working people can provide enormous fortunes for the rich who are doing the squeezing. That is what is happening today, and we should stop it.

What might be done to make lives better, not just for the elite but also for working people? It is easy to be pessimistic. Once political and financial power are increasingly concentrated, the dynamic does not appear to be self-correcting. The election of Donald Trump is understandable in the circumstances, but it is a gesture of frustration and rage that will make things worse, not better. Working-class whites do not believe that democracy can help them; in 2016, more than two-thirds of white working-class Americans believed that elections are controlled by the rich and by big corporations, so that it does not matter if they vote. Analysis by political scientists of voting patterns in Congress supports their skepticism; both Democratic and Republican lawmakers consistently vote for the interests of their more prosperous constituents with little attention to the interests of others.²³

Justice Louis Brandeis campaigned against the misbehavior of giant trusts at the end of the nineteenth century and was later nominated to the Supreme Court by Woodrow Wilson, becoming its first Jewish member. He thought that extreme inequality was incompatible with the preservation of democracy. This applies both to “good” and “bad” inequality; it doesn’t matter how people got rich if even those who earned their wealth legitimately use it to undermine the rights and interests of the non-rich. For us, the best way to deal with this is to stop the rent-seeking,

lobbying, and misuse of market power that is behind the extreme inequality, to stop the unfair process. If that is impossible, high marginal income taxes or, better—but practically much more difficult—a wealth tax would lessen the influence of fortunes in politics. But it is sometimes difficult to be optimistic. One historian has argued that inequality, once it is established, is only overcome by violent ruptures and that this has been true since the Stone Age.²⁴ We think that is too pessimistic, but it is hard to see today's levels of inequality lessening without reforms of the processes and institutions that produced them.

Yet there are some reasons for optimism, and there are policies that, even in our current flawed democracy, might be feasible and might make things better. Institutions can change. There is much intellectual ferment around these issues, and many good new ideas that we will discuss later in the book. But we end this introduction with another, but more optimistic, historical parallel.

In Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century, inequality was greater than anything we see today. The hereditary landowners not only were rich but also controlled Parliament through a severely limited franchise. After 1815, the notorious Corn Laws kept out imports of wheat until the local price was so high that people were at risk of starving; high prices of wheat, even if they hurt ordinary people, were very much in the interests of the land-owning aristocracy, who lived off the rents supported by the restriction on imports—rent-seeking of the classic and here literal kind, and rent-seeking that did not stop at killing people; laws that were “written in blood.” The Industrial Revolution had begun, there was a ferment of innovation and invention, and national income was rising. Yet working people were not benefiting. Mortality rates rose as people moved from the relatively healthy countryside to stinking, unsanitary cities. Each generation of military recruits was shorter than the last, speaking to their ever-worsening undernutrition in childhood, from not getting enough to eat and from the nutritional insults of unsanitary conditions. Religious observance fell, if only because churches were in the countryside, not in the new industrial cities. Wages were stagnant and would remain so for half a century. Profits were rising, and the share of

profits in national income rose at the expense of labor. It would have been hard to predict a positive outcome of this process.

Yet by century's end, the Corn Laws were gone and the rents and fortunes of the aristocrats had fallen along with the world price of wheat, especially after 1870 when wheat from the American prairie flooded the market. A series of reform acts had extended the franchise, from one in ten males at the beginning of the century to more than half by its end, though the enfranchisement of women would wait until 1918.²⁵ Wages had begun to rise in 1850, and the more than century-long decline in mortality had begun.²⁶ All of this happened without a collapse of the state, without a war or a pandemic, through gradual change in institutions that slowly gave way to the demands of those who had been left behind. Even if we do not know just why, or whether the logic applies to our own times, the facts themselves surely justify at least a limited optimism.

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