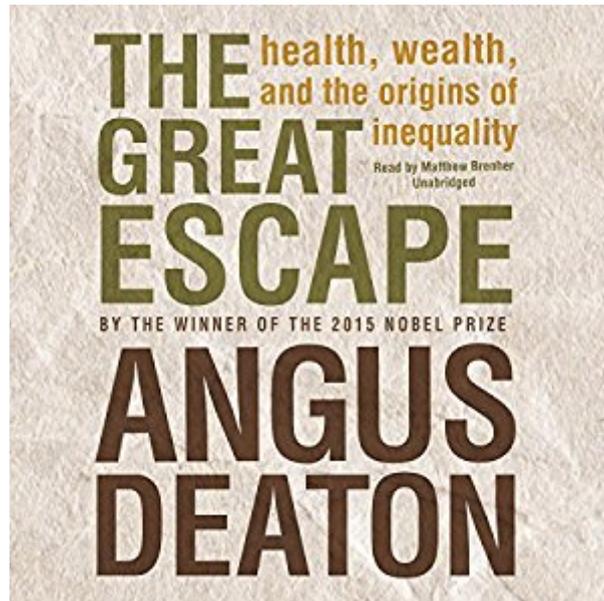


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The Great Escape: Health, Wealth, And The Origins Of Inequality



Synopsis

The world is a better place than it used to be. People are healthier, wealthier, and live longer. Yet the escapes from destitution by so many has left gaping inequalities between people and nations. In *The Great Escape*, Angus Deaton - one of the foremost experts on economic development and on poverty - tells the remarkable story of how, beginning 250 years ago, some parts of the world experienced sustained progress, opening up gaps and setting the stage for today's disproportionately unequal world. Deaton takes an in-depth look at the historical and ongoing patterns behind the health and wealth of nations and addresses what needs to be done to help those left behind. Deaton describes vast innovations and wrenching setbacks: the successes of antibiotics, pest control, vaccinations, and clean water on one hand and disastrous famines and the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the other. He examines the United States, a nation that has prospered but is today experiencing slower growth and increasing inequality. He also considers how economic growth in India and China has improved the lives of more than a billion people. Deaton argues that international aid has been ineffective and even harmful. He suggests alternative efforts - including reforming incentives to drug companies and lifting trade restrictions - that will allow the developing world to bring about its own great escape. Demonstrating how changes in health and living standards have transformed our lives, *The Great Escape* is a powerful guide to addressing the well-being of all nations.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 12 hours and 13 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: January 14, 2016

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B01ACARP8M

Best Sellers Rank: #16 in Books > Law > Health & Medical Law > Health Law #37 in Books > Business & Money > Economics > Income Inequality #57 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > World

Customer Reviews

I was underwhelmed. Professor Deaton is highly regarded in his field of development economics, and there is one chapter, the penultimate, that focuses on that sector and it was hard-hitting, pithy, and insightful. Professor Deaton is a proponent of the theme that external aid does not make much difference in the least developed countries, due in large measure to corruption within the recipient nation. He lays out his case forcefully. For those who have encountered the philosophical, non-empirical argument of Peter Singer in favor of such aid, this chapter is a very effective rejoinder. But otherwise, the book is basically a survey course -- at a 50,000 foot, totally macro level -- of the developments, mostly positive, in material wellbeing and health over the last couple of centuries -- the "Great Escape" of the title -- with some very high-level consideration of the reasons why they have not been uniform and the implications of the lack of uniformity. Pretty much everything is studied at the level of comparing statistics collected at the national level, which I find to be maddeningly frustrating as there are so many differences one can find between any pair of nations. And then one gets to the chapter on cross-border aid, and the author completely switches his vantage point and says that you can't limit your scrutiny of cross-border aid to the nation-to-nation level, you have to look at what is going on inside the recipient nation. I agree, but by the same token doesn't that perspective conflict and undermine the nation-to-nation comparisons that make up the prior chapters?

This is an important book by one of the foremost development economists in the world. It is highly readable, indeed written in an entertaining manner. Deaton paints on a vast canvas in time and space, embracing both developed and developing worlds. His theme is how in the course of history, and especially during the past three decades, hundreds of millions of people managed to escape abject poverty. He brings new insights into the sequencing and the many interwoven and often counter-intuitive linkages between growth and quality of life, especially health and longevity. His story begins when we were all hunters/gatherers and ends in 2013 in the unresolved aftermath of the financial crisis. One of Deaton's main themes is that economic growth does not necessarily produce improved quality of life, especially when income is distributed very unequally - as is the case in today's United States. So for example, in spite of lower economic growth in France than in the United States, because of a less unequal distribution of income, "all but the top 1 percent of the French population did better than all but the top 1 percent of the American population". (p. 260) In discussing the relationships between rich and poor countries, I very much like Deaton's implicit framework, which distinguishes "us" (the people of the North), "we" (the Northern governments), aid recipients ("their governments"), and "they" (the people of the South). This helps to cut through a lot

of semantic and conceptual confusion, especially when discussing "development assistance". The book concludes with a chapter about how to help those left behind the "Great Escape" from poverty.

Has the human race made progress since the days when all our lives were nasty, brutish, and short? Some might think this question patently silly, since it would appear to answer itself. But Angus Deaton finds in it a point of entry into his inquiry on "health, wealth, and the origins of inequality," the subtitle of his ambitious new book. He is in no doubt that humanity has progressed, not steadily but by fits and starts "and continues to do so to this day. "Today," he writes, "children in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to survive to age 5 than were English children born in 1918 . . . [and] India today has higher life expectancy than Scotland in 1945." In *The Great Escape*, Deaton, a veteran professor of economics and international affairs at Princeton, explores inequality "between classes and between countries" with a detailed statistical analysis of trends in infant mortality, life expectancy, and income levels over the past 250 years. He concludes that the large-scale inequality that plagues policymakers and reformers alike in the present day is the result of the progress humanity has made since The Great Divergence (between "the West and the rest") since the advent of the Industrial Revolution. "Economic growth," Deaton asserts, "has been the engine of international income inequality." No argument there: Deaton is far from alone in this belief. Other scholars have written extensively about this topic in recent years. *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World*, by Gregory Clark, is just one example.

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