

WHICH CAME FIRST, THE FAILED IDEOLOGY OR THE SPIKING MORTALITY RATES?

One of the things that drives me nuts about the obsessive focus on Russia right now is the claim that Vladimir Putin is the biggest risk to America, to the EU, to western civilization. That claim ignores that – to the extent Putin is engaged in policies to maximize his advantage vis a vis American hegemony right now – the opportunity to do so has been created by the failure of American hegemony. The biggest threats to the EU, for example, stem from the idiotic policies “technocrats” enacted after America crashed the global economy and a refugee crisis caused, in part, by the chaos America has sown in the Middle East over the last 15 years (and to some degree manipulated by “allies” like Turkey). Sure, Putin is making the most of the American failures, but the underlying causes that make right wing populists popular, here and in Europe, can be significantly blamed on America. Significantly, that’s about a failure of the policies dictated by American ideology to deliver on what it promises – peace, democracy, prosperity.

Which brings me to this passage from a WSJ article on the latest installment of Anne Case and Angus Deaton’s documentation of a big spike in mortality among white people in America.

“For many Americans, America is starting to fail as a country,” said James Smith, chair in labor markets and demographic research at the Rand Corp., who wasn’t involved in the paper and said he was struck that mortality rates are rising for young working-class adults. “The bad things that are going on in America do not appear to be going on in Western European countries, and that’s a big

deal.”

The spike in mortality, Case argues, is not about existing life conditions, but rather about “accumulating despair.”

The increase in mortality rate for working-class whites can't be explained by declining income prospects alone. Blacks and Hispanics face many of the same income struggles but have experienced declines in mortality over the same period, the two economists argued, though their findings reveal more recent troubles for blacks, with gains stagnating the past couple of years amid an increase in drug overdoses and stalling progress against heart disease.

“This doesn't seem to be about current income,” Ms. Case said in a call with reporters. “It seems to be about accumulating despair.”

The rising mortality of working-class white adults appears to be rooted both in worse job opportunities and increasing social dysfunction, following generations of relatively stable lives that involved job advancement and an expectation of living better than one's parents, the researchers said.

As a number of people have noted, both today and after earlier releases of Case and Deaton's data, one of the few precedents for such a spike is the rise in mortality in Russia leading up to and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Addiction and other despair-related health problems were significant in both.

Which got me wondering: to the extent this is driven by a failure in ideology – by the failure of the American dream – which comes first, the failed ideology or the rising mortality rates? That is, are people dying of despair in response

to the recognition the American dream doesn't deliver for people like them anymore (which, it should be said, has always involved white Americans benefitting from the unequal treatment of brown people both in the US and around the globe)? Or did a worsening lifestyle lead to a spike in mortality that has contributed to despair and the collapse of ideology?

I don't know the answer – and admit it might be more closely tied to policy outcomes than ideology. But as we try to figure it out, we ought to be focusing at least as much on how to roll out life and meaning that can sustain Americans again as we are on blaming Putin for our recent failures to do that.