

mee de kritische lezer zelf een mening kan vormen over de Europese vraagstukken van het moment. En dat is precies wat een goed handboek moet bieden.

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Angus Deaton, *The Great Escape. Health, Wealth and the Origins of Inequality* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013) 360 p. ISBN 978-0-691-15354-4

Angus Deaton is one of the world-leading experts in the study of long-term economic development and global inequality. In *The Great Escape* Deaton argues that people are wealthier, healthier and probably also happier today than they ever were in the past. People enjoy longer lives today than at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more often live with larger degrees of personal freedom. Yet, the great escape from poverty and pre-mature death has also generated gaping inequalities between people, countries and world regions. According to Deaton “averages are no consolation to those who have been left behind” (219). Within the meta-narrative of global social and economic progress, Deaton thus addresses the big welfare innovations of the past two centuries, along with the most wrenching setbacks and major policy failures. Deaton counts the massive post-war international aid effort as one of the most poisonous failures to remedy global poverty.

*The Great Escape* aims at a broad readership that extends far beyond the confined circle of economists and economic historians interested in modern ‘development’. Deaton takes time to explain concepts and statistics in layman’s terms and formulates his arguments in crystal clear prose. He pays ample attention to the policy implications one may draw from the historical record of global wealth and health developments, and underpins his arguments with carefully selected graphs and statistics. The book starts in chapter one with a broad survey of what we know about the wellbeing of the world and develops an argument how material welfare growth is connected to increasing life satisfaction. Deaton also explains how the construction of development statistics always contains moral assessments of what surveyors do and do not value, and calls for making these normative underpinnings more explicit than they often are.

Chapters two and three discuss how the world has escaped pre-mature death, how this started in Europe and how life saving technologies and knowledge, such as the germ theory of disease, diffused to other parts of the world. Chapter four proceeds to discuss how the ongoing progress in medical knowledge keeps raising life expectancies in rich countries and how the massive investment efforts in old-

age health provision in the rich countries partly off-sets the global convergence in life expectancies due to decreasing child mortality rates. This chapter also contains an interesting analysis of the impact of smoking on gender health inequality and how this affects differences in life expectancies among the richest countries.

In chapter five, which I find the best chapter of the book, Deaton explains how unequal the fruits of continuing economic growth in the US have been distributed since the 1970s. Despite solid rates of GDP per capita growth, PPP adjusted incomes of the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution have actually fallen. Deaton draws on the work of Piketty and co-authors to show how the rich became much richer, and how this has supported a divergence in socio-economic opportunities and political voice, making the US a less democratic country than it used to be. In Chapter six Deaton shifts his lens towards global inequality, explaining how current benchmarks of global poverty are dependent on seemingly arbitrary statistical choices, and paying attention to the big impact of the rapid economic development of India and China on current assessments of the global poverty rate.

The final chapter (seven) is certainly the most passionately written, but it loses some of careful argumentation style developed in the rest of the book. Deaton starts with the conclusion that no evidence exists that international aid has improved the lot of the poorest people, suggests that there is tentative evidence of the opposite and proceeds with a rather personal tirade against the international aid industry. His view that 'aid corrupts' has two sides. First, aid has strengthened predatory regimes that have used the money against their own people, so instead of improving the lot of the poor, it has actually made things worse. Second, aid is inherently motivated by Western interests of a different kind: part of it is driven by the white man's burden, fulfilling rich people's desire 'to do good'. Another part is driven by ill-conceived self-interest, especially during the cold war, when aid flows, including the supply of arms, were to support befriended regimes, irrespective of their domestic political agenda. Deaton loathes the 'we know what is good for you' mentality, but is willing to make an exception for health aid. Deaton's solution is to cut down aid programs as quickly as possible and replace them by international institutions that really help the poor, for instance, by granting preferential market access.

The Great Escape is a major achievement in making the explicit connection between the origins and development of wealth and health inequality. It offers a wide interdisciplinary reading in economics, history and demography. The book is also strong in showing the normative choices behind the measures used by economists and development policy makers to assess global inequalities in wealth and health. Readers in search for a grand theory or a deep analysis of the ultimate causes of global inequality may be disappointed, as Deaton does not offer an overarching framework. Yet, there is a lot to take away for readers of very different

backgrounds and one would wish every book in economics to be as accessible as Deaton's *Great Escape*.

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Dana Wessell Lightfoot, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013) 220 p. ISBN 978-07-1908-946-6.

One of the more interesting trends in recent medieval women's history has been the publication of a number of local studies that have cumulatively upset received notions of women's legal and economic status. Earlier studies, such as the work of Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, emphasized women's disadvantages in the Roman law legal systems and dowry regimes of southern Europe. Most of these studies focused on legal codes and sources from Italy, particularly Florence. Since many saw the imposition of Roman law as the crucial feature that limited women's agency, they concluded that in southern Europe women faced special disadvantages, legal invisibility, and family victimization. However, in the last decade, historians have analyzed women's legal and economic status in many locations outside of Italy, and they have relied less on legal prescriptions and more upon sources of actual practice. The cumulative weight of their studies have begun to overturn the view that the imposition of Roman law resulted in women having the same limited status in every city and state of southern Europe as they did in Florence.

Dana Wessell Lightfoot's monograph, *Women, Dowries and Agency: Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, is a welcome addition to this important series of local studies. Examining the city and province of Valencia in the Crown of Aragon from 1419-1439, her study focuses on the interaction between the Valencian legal code, the *Furs*, and legal cases involving labouring-status women contracting marriages, acquiring dowries, and seeking restitution of those dowries from improvident husbands. Coming from two archives in Valencia, her sources are notarial and court records including dotal contracts, testaments, and dowry restitution litigation. Lightfoot argues that non-elite women exercised agency in the "projects of marriage," such as providing all or part of their dowries and contracting marriages without supervision of a male family member, and after the marriage, in protection of their dowry and *creix*, a gift by the husband for his wife's virginity similar to the *morgengabe*. Despite the restrictions on married women in the *Furs*, Lightfoot contends that labouring-status wives "were still able to negotiate a measure of control," as they took advantage of legal protections. (p. 1)