

**Book review**

## **The age of insecurity: Coming together as things fall apart**

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It is rare that one can articulate well the anxiety that pervades modern life to describe how historical factors have shaped and conditioned a universal predicament. Astra Taylor's *The age of insecurity: Coming together as things fall apart* is that exceptional work. Timed perfectly for our age, yet also timeless in capturing our fragile commonality as a species, while still offering a sense of hope in solidarity. It is one also that shows what inhibits education. It is an essential work for educators to illustrate Freire's (1970) concept of praxis in the contemporary age.

First broadcast as a Canadian Broadcasting Company's 2023 Massey Lecture series and focused primarily on the United States (US) and Canada, Taylor's work captures how we are, and feel, so burdened by debt, how it controls us, how we internalise financial anxiety, engendering a sense of security. While many point to the US for its many present problems and injustices, worse than when Taylor published

in 2023, her message is relevant for Australia. We are no stranger to modern anxiety, economic precariousness, growing misery and human-made ecological crisis. While ‘cost of living’ is often mentioned, housing is unaffordable and sending many of us into misery. It also means we skip meals for mortgage and rent, cannot pay bills, cannot get timely medical treatment, while only half are able to make ends meet, including a staggering rise in homelessness – most of whom are women over 50 (Rondinel 2023). These are not just our living conditions, but these are the conditions in which contemporary teaching and learning now occur. Students are expected to learn; teachers are expected to provide critical thinking and preparation for life, somehow.

It is staggering alone to think what the present cost burden of education is with Australia’s unprecedented levels of student debt. Though the current government boasts of its recent absolution of 20% of HECS-HELP debt, many will still be subject to a ‘debt treadmill’ since the average Arts graduate is making below the financial threshold that would be required to pay off student debt indexed to CPI (Norton 2025). The Jobs Ready Graduates policy has penalised those seeking an Arts or Law degree, into double the amount of private debt. Meanwhile, Australia’s university system is butchering its Arts programs, firing academic staff, and laying the groundwork for a society without critical education. Academic and journalist, Jenna Price, advised parents not to send their kids to a tertiary education, a damning critique of the state of our higher education sector (2025). Such an environment is an anathema to education, certainly to anyone pursuing adult education.

It is because of these conditions that Taylor’s *The age of insecurity* is critical for educators and essential for critical education. It is both empowering as an educative tool for our modern dilemma and provides the framework to counter the forces which denude of us our humanity through radical pedagogical practice.

Taylor describes what we should really be talking about, what we should be working together to overcome and what our political demands could be: how similar we all are in feelings of insecurity and how this internalised feeling is due to political and historical factors that prevent us from finding common humanity with another and prevent us from achieving a sense of purpose. That shared vulnerability is what Taylor calls *existential insecurity* - our inherent mortality and fragility as a

species and unescapable dependency on each other for survival. It is what each of us shares with one another.

In contrast, *manufactured insecurity* is that which is imposed on us, those forces that bear down on all of us, burden us with debt, feelings of inadequacy, and the constant mental anguish that comes from a lack of material security. Taylor informs her reader of historical episodes which have shaped this manufactured insecurity. Whether it be the short-lived Charter of the Forest of 1217 which gave a legal right to material security only to be taken away by the ruling class, that Adam Smith intentionally baked manufactured insecurity into his origin myth of capitalism, the founding of Canada by the colonial Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) that used legal instruments to steal land from indigenous First Nation's peoples or our modern notion of banking 'securitisation' that only serves to entrap the common person in compounding financial debt we hardly understand (56; 195-207; 229). These are but a few examples of how Taylor informs us of the many ways we are controlled by the imposition of privatised debt, our imagination stolen from us replaced with constant fear and anxiety of our precarious existence.

What is remarkably powerful about *The age of insecurity* is that this is not just liberation through educational empowerment but also offers a radical pedagogy praxis of movement-building to counter the sense of traumatic overwhelm, isolation, numbness, and exhaustion. Taylor details her work with the Debt Collective which organises to counter manufactured insecurity. The Debt Collective is designed to help those most affected by numerous forms of imposed debt in the United States including mortgage, rent, credit card, fines and student loans (247; 257-8). The group is not just a transactional 'service' but takes inspiration from 1970s feminist 'consciousness raising circles' to share lived experience, expose how financial systems are designed to perpetuate and profit off people's insecurity and find solidarity and urgency for changing unjust structures (p.242-3). The Debt Collective has been successful in collective actions to rid probation debt, convince the Biden administration to forgive \$10k-\$20k per borrower of US student debt and now helps exonerate other forms of debt including back rent, medical bills, credit card debt, fines and fees (242;257-8;287).

Such a movement is the praxis needed to confront our modern dilemma. It is a place where existential insecurity is permitted, allowed, and

encouraged and shows how we organise through our shared humanity. It is what hope should be: how to imagine a future and how to work in solidarity to enable that vision. It is that which makes Taylor's work unique for contemporary education in two ways: it is the empowerment through understanding that authoritarian capitalist forces rob us of our humanity, connections that should be taught in all classrooms and it goes much further to offer a way in which contemporary radical education can take place to challenge power structures.

It is not surprising that Taylor shares her early education in the 1960s at a counterculture school built on principles of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire (109-111). She recalls how her material security was ensured so that she was 'supported to explore' 'whatever we wanted or needed to know', paying homage to educator John Holt's adage that the 'human animal is a learning animal' (116-125).

Though not officially in the education curriculum, *The age of insecurity* offers us what education can be, and what education can imagine is possible and act to enable it. Though our contemporary age is plagued by manufactured insecurity, human-made environmental destruction, and the still very real threat of authoritarianism, Taylor offers us hope. This hope is the tangible hope of realising our inherent human vulnerabilities, finding solidarity in our common fragility and the boldness to act collectively against unjust systems.

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