

Our precarious present

Humans' innate vulnerability should bring us together —but capitalism's manufactured insecurity sees us more divided than ever

By: Reviewed by Matt Henderson

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To be human is a precarious thing. Our species has only been around for a few hundred thousand years and despite the fact that we are hairless and that we aren't very fast, and that we aren't very strong, we have managed to beat the odds and become the most dominant species on this planet, ushering in a new geological age — the anthropocene.

What makes us unique is our very consciousness — our ability and desire to become secure not only physically, but also metaphysically. And this has become increasingly more difficult in the 21st century. These notions of security and insecurity are at the core of what it means to be human, and are the springboard of inquiry for philosopher, writer and activist Astra Taylor.

In her new book *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*, based on her CBC Massey Lectures, Taylor confronts the idea of insecurity as both a natural condition of life and also one that is perpetually manufactured by capitalism. Born in Winnipeg and now living in New York, Taylor makes the argument that insecurity is in fact a key element in driving healthy societies forward — our collective reaction to insecurity exists to “help ensure individual and collective well-being.”



Isabella De Maddalena photo

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Conversely, manufactured insecurity creates the conditions produced by capitalism and the elite as a means to remove the commons — those elements that have historically sustained the basic needs of our species. In this sense,

“Insecurity goads us to keep working, earning, and craving — craving money, material goods, prestige, and more, more, more.”

The insecurity created by western and industrial societies not only creates massive inequality and removes people from the means of production, but leads us down a path where we begin to protect ourselves from others. Taylor argues that the individualism manufactured by Lockean political and social theories have sent us down the path of gated communities, private schools, private health care and a toxic fear of the other, something shrewd politicians exploit daily: pit the people against each other while the commons are exploited from under their feet.

But how, then, do we foster and nurture a society where the natural insecurity of being human leads us to a more egalitarian world where everyone has the basic needs, both physical and metaphysical, for a decent life? Taylor posits that “history shows that increased material security helps people be more open minded, tolerant, and curious, whereas rising insecurity does the reverse, causing dogmatism, rigidity, and bigotry to spike.”

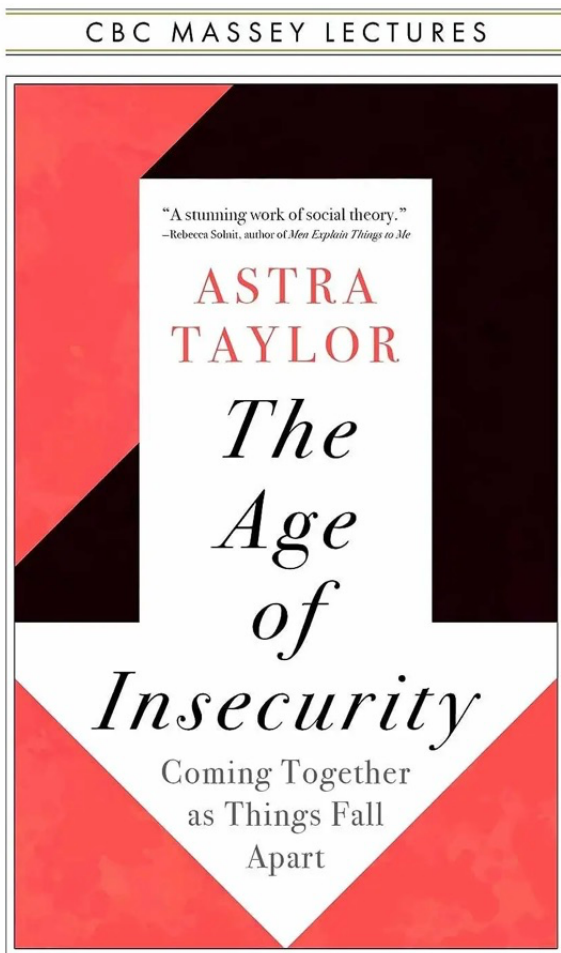
The hate and division witnessed in our society is a symptom of manufactured insecurity — where conditions have been created for us to believe that people are out to get us, that education is merely designed for future wealth accumulation and where self-worth is based on the size of our truck or suburban home. Taylor suggests that “When people feel insecure, it is easier to convince them that immigrants are taking their jobs, that vaccines are a conspiracy, and that professors are indoctrinating students with ‘gender ideology’.” And the neoliberals, Trump, Putin and the lot fully understand and exploit this sense of insecurity.

Taylor asks us to contemplate a better world — one based on what she dubs an ethic of insecurity: an ideological stance where “to be vulnerable and dependent on each other is not a burden to escape but the essence of human existence.” The natural state of insecurity, the one that brings people together to create collective and egalitarian communities, is now dominated fully by an imposed insecurity that obscures “the desire to give and receive care as an essential human motivation” in exchange for one based on “coercion and punishment to keep society moving.”

A society where people have their basic needs met is one that is more tolerant, curious and caring. This is the very purpose of public education — to teach

young learners the knowledge, skills and ways of being to care for others, the planet and themselves.

As the new school year begins, perhaps this ethic of insecurity, collectivism and egalitarianism should be on the forefront of every educator's mind.



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