

Insecurity Is A Feature, Not A Bug, Of Capitalism. But It Can Spark Resistance



*Astra Taylor - Photo:
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Debt abolitionist Astra Taylor discusses how capitalism's manufactured insecurity can feed movements for radical change.

Capitalism is a socioeconomic system that depends upon exploitation and generates inequality. In a recently published book titled, *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*, filmmaker, writer and political organizer Astra Taylor also describes capitalism as an inherently insecurity-producing machine.

From education and home ownership to workplace surveillance, capitalism manufactures insecurity, argues Taylor, a co-founder of the [Debt Collective](#). This insecurity makes us increasingly vulnerable to economic uncertainty, which the system weaponizes in turn against us.

Yet, Taylor argues in the exclusive interview for *Truthout*, the system's manufactured insecurity can also band people together to demand radical

reforms, although insecurity in today's world seems to be drawing people increasingly toward authoritarian political leaders.

*C. J. Polychroniou: It is often said we live in strange and dangerous times. Indeed, there are crises in place which threaten human survival; there is continuous growth in economic inequality since the 1980s and authoritarianism is on the move as democracy weakens. In this context, in your recently published book aptly titled, *The Age of Insecurity: Coming Together as Things Fall Apart*, you have described insecurity as a “defining feature of our time” and an essential feature of the capitalist system. Now, capital reigns, to be sure, and capitalism exploits insecurities, but isn't occasional insecurity also a natural part of life? Why make insecurity a driving force behind today's economy and politics? Why not resentment, or protest actions, which are growing throughout the world, although some studies indicate that the same thing is happening with political apathy?*

Astra Taylor: Insecurity relates to the many intensifying and intersecting crises we face today — unaffordable housing, rising debt, toxic media, worsening mental health, an emboldened far right, climate catastrophe, Artificial Intelligence and Big Tech, the list goes on.

I wouldn't say that I “make” insecurity a driving force behind today's politics. I'd argue that it just is one. That's because, as I show in the book, insecurity is a defining component of capitalism — one as essential as the profit motive. To paraphrase your question, capitalism not only *exploits* insecurities; more fundamentally, it generates them.

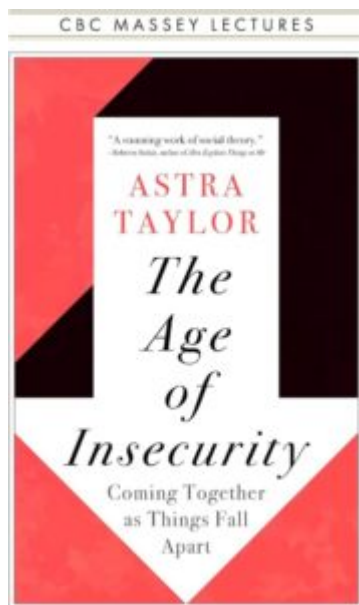
Insecurity, in other words, isn't just an unfortunate byproduct of our current competitive economic order. It's a core product. If you aren't insecure, you don't keep buying, hustling, accumulating. Insecurity is the stick that keeps us scrambling and striving.

And yet, as you note, insecurity is also a natural part of life.

In the book, I distinguish between two kinds of insecurity. First there is *existential insecurity*, or the kind of insecurity that is inherent to human life and that stems from the fact we are mortal creatures who can't survive without the care of others. Then there is what I call *manufactured insecurity*, and this is the kind of insecurity that is essential to the functioning of a market society.

Looking back over the centuries to the dawn of the industrial era, I show how capitalism began by making people insecure in this modern sense — by severing people from their communities and traditional livelihoods so they had nothing to sell but their labor. We see this dynamic playing out today, as officials pursue monetary policies explicitly designed to weaken the hand of workers. That's the manufactured insecurity at work.

This might all sound rather heavy, but I really tried to write the book with a light touch — drawing on history and economics while also incorporating myth, psychology and even some humorous memoir elements. And there's hope. Right now, our society is structured to worsen rather than tend to our insecurities and vulnerabilities. But we can always arrange things differently.



The notion of insecurity as a feature in today's world might lead people to assume that it leads to despair and inaction. Yet, you argue that insecurity can indeed be a step toward creating solidarity for the purpose of challenging and eventually transforming the system. Is this a theoretical statement behind the purported symbiotic relationship between capitalism and insecurity, or one based on actual empirical evidence? In other words, can you describe how insecurity translates into collective action and what form, in your own view, collective action needs to take for the system to be transformed?

In the book, I argue that insecurity can cut both ways. It can spur defensive and destructive compulsions, or it can be a conduit to empathy, humility, belonging and solidarity. We see this all the time. The right wing knows this and is dedicated to inflaming people's insecurities, encouraging them to misdirect their rage toward the even-more-vulnerable — rather than toward the economic system and the elites who profit from the status quo.

One example I give is how workers and the unemployed organized during the Great Depression. We forget it today, but "insecurity" was actually a critical concept in the battle for the New Deal. Franklin Roosevelt called insecurity "one of the most fearsome evils of our economic system" and made the concept of security a cornerstone of the welfare state. I certainly see insecurity — shame,

fear, anxiety about the future — transformed into solidarity in my work with the Debt Collective, the union for debtors that I helped found.

In today's economic climate, the rental housing crisis has become particularly acute in thoroughly neoliberal societies like the United States, but rents have also exploded across Europe and more and more people are facing precarious living conditions. Are there innovative solutions for the rental housing crisis? For example, can [Vienna's social housing policy](#) be duplicated in countries like the United States?

Absolutely. I spend some time on the example of Austrian social housing in the second chapter of the book. It's a fantastic example of how to eradicate a form of material insecurity that is now depressingly endemic across North America.

In the book, I return again and again to a core paradox. As I write, "Today, many of the ways we try to make ourselves and our societies more secure — money, property, possessions, police, the military — have paradoxical effects, undermining the very security we seek and accelerating harm done to the economy, the climate, and people's lives, including our own."

Housing really is a prime example. In the U.S., a paltry 1 percent of housing is provided on a non-market basis. The commodification of housing ensures that huge numbers of people will be priced out and perpetually insecure and also unhoused. The very thing that we are told will finally guarantee us security — a mortgage on a one-family unit — also helps drive the destabilization of our communities. Ever-appreciating values and rents push working-class people out of their towns and neighborhoods. Single-family, car-dependent fiefdoms are ecologically wasteful. Not to mention the way the financial sector and the rise of Wall Street landlords are further enriched by this model, further contributing to volatility. Social housing is the only way out of this conundrum, and the only way to ensure real housing security for all.

The Biden administration has made inroads on student debt, but student debt cancellation is still far from becoming a reality, largely because of the Supreme Court's ultraconservative majority. First, I would like you to explain to readers why the Debt Collective, which you co-founded in 2014 and which happens to be the first union for debtors, talks about "debt cancellation" and rejects the term "debt forgiveness," and then whether you remain optimistic that an ultimate

victory for student-loan borrowers is going to happen at some point down the road.

We reject the idea of “debt forgiveness” because debtors did nothing wrong. People don’t need to be forgiven for pursuing an education — for wanting to learn or to better their lives. This is why the Debt Collective prefers to speak of debt “cancellation,” “relief” or “abolition.”

Our small-but-mighty movement has come a long way in a decade. I believe that we will win — if people get off the sidelines and join us. One easy way people reading can do that is by taking 10 minutes to submit a dispute to the Department of Education using our new [Student Debt Release Tool](#). Anyone with federal loans can do so. The tool will send a former letter demanding relief to the top brass at the Department of Education. The more applications they receive, the more pressure we can apply.

We’ve had victories, we’ve had setbacks, and then more victories and setbacks. I’ve been in the trenches long enough to know that’s how movements go. The arc of justice is, sadly, rather crooked and sometimes loops back on itself. But this is not a moment to throw up our hands — it’s one to keep holding the president’s feet to the fire. The movement for debt abolition is just getting started.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout*’s Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German,

Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).