

Insecurity in a COVID World

- [Andrew Hamilton](#)
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The time of recovery from COVID-19 is necessarily a time of insecurity. In the face of financial uncertainty many people have no guaranteed access to income, shelter or work. They find it hard to plan for the future because they do not know what resources and possibilities they will have. Nor will financial security return until there is assurance that the coronavirus can be managed. *Eureka Street* reflects in a very minor way that insecurity. The change you might have noticed in the publication is a response to the diminishment of financial resources occasioned by COVID-19.



That sort of insecurity is a state of affairs over which we have no control. Looking at it optimistically or pessimistically will not change the reality. But insecurity breeds insecurity. In the face of insecurity we can feel insecure. Our identity as persons can be shaken by the insecurity of our circumstances. This is not inevitable. Nor is it necessarily lasting. Some people will be temporarily or lastingly paralysed by anxiety; others will be more resilient.

These different responses to insecurity are partly a matter of temperament. But they may also reflect the depth of our personal investment in the things that are put at risk. If our identity is totally tied up with financial security, personal safety, particular relationships, reputation or our position in society, then we shall naturally feel deeply insecure when these things are seriously threatened. If our identity is rooted in a deeper sense of self and a trust that transcend circumstances, we shall be able more easily to overcome our feelings of personal insecurity. The daunting Christian model of this is St Paul who boasted of the shipwrecks, floggings, abuse and other hardships he had suffered, sure that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ.

The uncertainty about the future shape of life after the immediate threat of COVID-19 and the certainty that it will involve loss will surely generate strong feelings of insecurity in public life. Such feelings can be destructive, leading people to blame particular social groups for the situation. Even in the less troubled recent past politicians have tried to deflect blame from themselves by directing it at unemployed people, racial, religious and other minority groups, refugees or other convenient targets. Their shaming is the sacrifice that takes insecurity away. The current hostility to Chinese people living in Australia, fanned by those who see China as the enemy we need to have, is a straw in the wind.

Times of insecurity bring out confident people who offer strong and decisive leadership that will restore security. In closed institutions like detention centres, reform schools and institutions for children the sacrifice to public anxiety has often been the establishment of a punitive regime under an inflexible head, in which both staff and inmates feel insecure, rules are draconian and arbitrarily enforced. The regime corrupts both staff and inmates by fear and lack of transparency.

The same dynamic can be seen on a cosmic scale in the totalitarian regimes of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini. They offered security through a strong regime that identified persons and groups considered disloyal, hunted them out and dealt with them by removing the protection of law, presumption of innocence and other human rights. In the name of security the population was made massively insecure, awaiting the breaking down of their door at 3am and the disappearance of family and friends.

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Security regimes are often led by people who are personally insecure and seek unconstrained power to ensure security. But because the war against insecurity can never be fully won, it demands ever more weapons to fight with and more and more secrecy within which to operate. Its organs become a state within the state.

In classical security states, the task of organising security was given first to people who were not themselves personally insecure, hard men relishing power and prepared to make others pay any price in order to guarantee security. One might think of Felix Dzerzhinski in Russia and Reinhard Heydrich in Germany. But because the system corrupted those who worked in it, it became an institution for intensifying the insecurity that spawned it. It attracted people who wanted power outside any framework of law and morality. Its public face became men like Beria, Yagoda and Yezhov whose brutality was matched only by their greed and lust, and finally by their insecurity.

The experience of Germany, Russia and Italy after the 1914-18 war remains a cautionary tale of what can happen in times of acute insecurity. The conditions in those nations, of course, were very different from those in Australia today. In small ways, however, we have already seen the same dynamic at work in Australia. The insecurity occasioned by the arrival of many boats with asylum seekers led to an election campaign based on stopping the boats, the stripping from people seeking asylum of protection under the rule of law, their dumping on Manus Island, the regime described by Behrouz Bouchani and the militarisation of the Immigration Department. The moral corruption entailed in this history was represented in the TV series *Stateless*.

We should assess the recent attempts to extend the powers, secrecy and impunity of the security apparatus in Australia against this cultural background. In other nations such institutions have been a cancer that corrupts its way through society. Australia, of course, is different. But when the present euphoria at having so-far dodged the bullet of COVID-19 gives way to the harsh grind of economic pressures that afflict people differently, the cries of social unrest and the siren call of security may be heard in our land. The wisdom of our response to them will depend on the respect for human dignity that we have insisted on in our laws today.



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Main image: Illustration Chris Johnston

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