# Claustropolitanism at the End of the World: Rethinking Post-Pandemic Globalization and Higher Education

الكلوستروبوليتانية في نهاية العالم

إعادة النظر في عولمة ما بعد الجائحة والتعليم العالي

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**Abstract**

This theoretical article develops a new trope for understanding globalization after the COVID-19 pandemic.  Science fictional genres are filled with - and fuelled by - dystopic narratives of endings, wars, apocalypses, famines and – indeed – zombies.  Yet the benevolent cosmopolitan sociology developed by Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Scott Lash at the turn of the 21st century, did not provide a rationale or understanding for September 11, the Global Financial Crisis, or the pandemic.  Beck's 'zombie concept' was no match for the – metaphoric – zombie hoards over-running popular culture and higher education.  Multiculturalism and the belief in the public good were crushed by an unregulated banking sector, a lack of funding for public health and public education, and a political system run on post-expertise, opinion and subjectivity.  In response to this intellectual gap, absence and lack, this article develops a post-disciplinary claustropolitanism. Deploying the research from Paul Virilio and Steve Redhead, a new intellectual dance is commenced, between 'end times' and 'new times,' to provide momentum for higher education at the end of the world. Claustropolitanism is a lens to understand the foreclosed times of unemployment, under-employment, inelegant university and industry 'partnerships,' and a declining respect for expertise.  Why was it necessary to enforce the sloganized salve of 'Believe the science' during a global pandemic, when scientific methods were required to enable the survival of millions of citizens? Noting this post-pandemic paradox, this article reveals the consequences of toxic globalization, and how claustropolitanism can renew a commitment to trans-localism, and learning.

**Keywords:** claustropolitanism – cosmopolitanism – Paul Virilio – popular culture - Steve Redhead

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الملخص:

يطوّر هذا المقال النظري صياغة جديدة لفهم العولمة بعد جائحة كوفيد - 19. إن أنواع الخيال العلمي تغص بالروايات البائسة( الديستوبيا) لنهايات العالم، الحروب، المجاعات بل وحتى  الزومبي. غير أن علم الإجتماع الكوسموبوليتي (الكوني) كما طوره كل من اولريش بيك، سيغمونت بومان وسكوت لاش لا يقدم أساسا منطقيا أو فهما لأحداث الحادي عشر سبتمبر أو الأزمة المالية العالمية، أو الجائحة. إن مقولة "الزومبي" لبيك لا تتطابق مع التعبير المجازي - إذا رأيت الزومبي يتجولون - السائدة في الثقافة الشعبية. لقد تلاشت التعددية الثقافية والإيمان بالصالح العام بفعل القطاع المصرفي غير المنظم، نقص التمويل اللازم للصحة العامة والتعليم العام وكذا النظام السياسي القائم على الخبرة اللاحقة. نتيجة هذه الفجوة الفكرية، أو النقص أو الغياب، يطور هذا المقال كلوستروبوليتنيه ما بعد التخصص. (post disiplinary claustopolitanism اعتمادا على ابحاث كل من بول فيريليو و ستيف ريدهيد جرت نقلة فكرية جديدة بين" أوقات النهاية" و"الأوقات الجديدة" من أجل إعطاء دفع قوي للتعليم العالي في نهاية العالم. الكلوستروبوليتينية هي عدسة لفهم الأوقات المتوقعة من البطالة، نقص العمالة و الشراكة الجامعية والصناعية غير النشيطة فضلا عن تراجع احترام الخبرات. لماذا كان من الضروري فرض شعار ''صدّق العلم'' خلال الجائحة العالمية عندما كانت الأساليب العلمية مطلوبة لتمكين ملايين المواطنين من البقاء على قيد الحياة. من خلال الإشارة إلى مفارقة ما بعد الجائحة، يكشف هذا المقال عن عواقب العولمة السامة  وكيف يمكن تجديد الإلتزام المحلية العابرة والتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكلوستروبوليتية- النزعة الكونية- بول فيريلو- الثقافة الشعبية- ستيف ريدهيد

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**Introduction**

Through mega global movements and interventions, such as the industrial revolution and waves of European colonization, the idea and application of the word 'development' has been – rightly – critiqued as embedding and activating a singular configuration of social, political, economic and cultural 'progress.' This progressivist arc perpetuates 19th century European narratives and languages of race, religion, masculinity and heteronormative family structures, while valuing and prioritizing particular disciplines, epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies over others.  Actually, development is uneven, chaotic and unpredictable.  Indeed, it is often in the eye of the beholder, or saved onto the hard drive of the researcher.  When investigating intellectual development in the history of ideas, it is difficult to locate and isolate beginnings and endings. As so powerfully revealed by Fernand Braudel, the longue durée is cut up and hemmed by conjunctures and events (2002).  The 21st century, although only at its beginning, has been buffeted by catastrophic events with a global impact, including a pandemic, invasions, terrorist acts, wars, and energy, food and climate crises.  To understand and research this brutalizing reality and its consequences on learning, teaching, research and education, I present a new concept.  In understanding the mega events of the last twenty years, I offer a lens for the consideration of scholars, offering a vision for new times in these end times.

## 1. Claustropolis:  the acorn of a concept

Claustropolitanism, like most concepts or theories created in the history of ideas, involves a dialogue with the dead.  This conversation with intellectual ghosts and the scholarship that remains to haunt our present embodies the power in and of knowledge:  the connective tissue that intellectually links scholars, even beyond death.  To define claustropolitanism, I return to its acorn concept: claustropolis.  This concept is derived from Paul Virilio, and extended through his conversations with Sylvere Lotinger.  Paul Virilio was a fascinating scholar, probably the least famous of the famous French intellectuals from the 1960s.  He was drawn to bunkers (Virilio, 2009c), disasters (Virilio, 2010b), disappearance(Virilio, 2009a), and 'grey ecology' (Virilio, 2009b)  He was a loner, Christian and a phenomenologist, certainly an unusual combination.  His research and writing, although punchy, provocative and innovative, were deployed inelegantly by researchers in the 1990s.  He was simplified to a theorist of technology, used to offer simple explanations for the expansion of the internet through society, culture and industry (Wark, 1994).  His most powerful scholarship is much more complex, involving an intricate unravelling of speed, accidents, chaos and crises (Virilio, 2012a; Virilio 2010a; Virilio, 2007a; Virilio, 2007b; Virilio, 2005; Virilio, 2002).  Hiswriting was pithy.  His prose was dense.  His ideas moved with energy and precision.  While not as well known as Jean Baudrillard or Jacques Derrida, his value in interpreting our post-pandemic times is obvious and important.

In 2008, in the book *Pure War*(2008), Virilio described our current era as moving from cosmopolis to claustropolis.  Note the date of the publication: 2008.  The trigger for his research was not COVID, or Brexit, or Trump, but the Global Financial Crisis.  He argued that the GFC was the pivot on which the culture changed, where public good became less important than private bailouts.  Greed in the finance sector was justified, normalized and subsidized by citizens who rarely benefited from the unbridled risks taken by a few, for private gain.   Even more significantly, and within months, a collective forgetting emerged of what the banks had done to the world through triggering ridiculous dangers for unearned profit.  Casino Capitalism – to cite Andrew Manno (2020) - was subsidized.  Public health, public education and public libraries paid the stake.  The banks recovered quickly.  The bonuses returned.  The stock market soared. Real estate capitalism continued to create artificial and arbitrary narratives of profit, progress, success and development.

Because of the lack of critique of this toxic globalization - that fuelled finance capitalism and real estate capitalism - greed, exploitation and excess were normalized.  This casino capitalism continued to shamble along, dragging toxicity, arbitrariness, confusion and despair into the global economy.  It is no surprise that zombie metaphors started to proliferate book titles and refereed

articles (Brabazon, 2016a).Conventional sociological concepts – like family, masculinity, femininity, marriage, heath, sickness and work – continued to exist in our lives. Yet the meanings encased within these words were emptied of content and context. Once voided of history and authenticity, toxicity was poured into these seemingly benevolent words, social realities and institutions (Smyth, 2017).

Virilio knew the Global Financial Crisis was important. Therefore he argued that our social structures moved from a cosmopolitan inflection – valuing multiculturalism, the public good, and the caring for and respecting of diversity – to claustropolis. His new concept captured the desperate desire of humans to escape a planet that is overcrowded, depleted, gridlocked and corrupt. Claustropolis is a retreat from globalization, running away from a toxic reality, rather than towards any state, tendency or cultural movement.

This was a powerful set of ideas developed by Virilio. Part observation and part high theory, Virilio offered a way of thinking – and remembering – a time of foreclosure, fear, confusion and alarm. However, as with so many of his pithy concepts, tropes and arguments, he made these statements and then intellectually walked away to probe other issues. Virilio was a labrador of a theorist. He was intensely interested in something, barked, and then moved to another topic of interest. Other scholars would enable and develop the movement of the concept beyond its historical moment.

**2. From Claustropolis to Claustropolitanism, and from Virilio to Redhead**
From this Virilio-inspired claustropolis, research and researchers must move to another scholar who kicked the concept further along the intellectual road. This scholar was similarly disturbed by the Global Financial Crisis and the active forgetting of its causes and consequences. Like Virilio, this scholar is also dead, continuing this zombie dialogue in the history of ideas. On this occasion, it was a highly personal death. The scholar who developed claustropolis from Virilio was the late Professor Steve Redhead, who I knew through an accident of marriage. Steve Redhead was interested in this concept before he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in June 2017. An early mention of – and engagement with - the concept from Redhead emerged in 2009, responding directly to Virilio's work (Redhead, 2009). Together, we workshopped the concept through some podcasts (Brabazon and Redhead, 2014a), and it started to appear in a more expansive fashion in his writing from 2015. From this foundation, Redhead added the following attributes to the concept, moving it from claustropolis to claustropolitanism, and from French intellectual life to – and through - Northern English Pessimism.

Steve Redhead defined claustropolitanism as a state or tendency. He also used Raymond Williams phrase to add definitional rigour, confirming it was, "a structure of feeling" (2015). Therefore, what was this structure of feeling encased in claustropolitanism? It captured a desire – an imperative - to step off the world, but being unable to escape. There is a longing to run away from reality, but all exits are blocked and all options are foreclosed. The rich are in gated communities, locked away in a futile attempt to find safety. For the poor, unemployed, underemployed, or the homeless, they cannot escape as they do not possess the financial provision to create any mode of safety in work, housing, food supplies or family stability. They are stuck in life-limiting oppression with no strategy for movement, progress or development. Claustropolitanism explains what happens to the working class no longer in work and the middle class locked in digitize, globalized, casualized employment, where they are reproletarianized (Brabazon and Redhead, 2014b), endlessly clocking into their beeping mobile technology. They never clock off, or exist outside of this digitized post/neo/Fordism.

These tendencies may feel familiar in their shape, direction, trajectory and texture, because popular culture has been activating claustropolitanism since 2008. Often popular culture is ahead of the theorizing about it. Pop activates a pedagogic function, teaching citizens about ideological shapes and configurations before scholars have the scholarly language to explain, evaluate and interpret (Jester, 2020). Consider the television programmes*Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *The Tunnel*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Fall* and *Top of the Lake*. These shows demonstrate how ordinary people – teachers, lawyers or police – are trapped by the economic, social and cultural conditions of their lives. They attempt to break out or break away, but remain hemmed into the irrationality, exploitation, abuse, violence, confusion and anger. The plot and metaphors of *Top of the Lake* remain stark in their poignancy and power. Is there anything more claustropolitan than living in shipping containers at the end of the world? Intriguingly, the geographical location for this metaphoric 'end of the world' was Aotearoa / New Zealand. These islands are antipodal to the British colonizers that erased and displaced Indigenous rights, laws, faith structures and practices. It was this antipodal 'end' of the world that also offers new postcolonial narratives for land, knowledge and law.

While screen-based culture has captured the desperation, violence and brutality of claustropolitanism, popular music is also playing with this trajectory of endings. The song "Purple Zone" (2022) by Soft Cell and the Pet Shop Boys is powerful and important. The idea that both these 1980s pop icons returned forty years after the commencement of their career is significant. This survival not only confirms longevity, but demonstrates the consequences of ageing. The notion that the performers of "Tainted Love" and the philosophers of Thinking

Pop (Brabazon, 2016b), the Pet Shop Boys, combined to sing a track was unusual. That it became successful and found new audiences is not as surprising as it may seem. Here is an extract of the lyric.

> Let's        get        out        of        this        life
> I'm              afraid              and              alone
> Paralysed in the purple zone (Soft Cell and Pet Shop Boys, 2022).

This is a stanza of endings, despair, and a loss of feeling, confusion, error and fear. The video features older people trapped in their flats and watching themselves age. Marc Almond – lead singer of Soft Cell – appears as a server in an ice cream van. Neil Tennant – lead singer of the Pet Shop Boys –stands behind a bar pulling pints. A young woman is shown day drinking in an alley, and another woman watches her life drip away as she serves fried food to customers. Through the lyric, the ageing voices and the video performances, the desperation, loneliness and pointlessness of life is seen and heard. Alienation is added to the trope of claustropolitanism.

Claustropolitanism is a structure of feeling. Not only are houses foreclosed, but lives are foreclosed. A 'good life' is colonized by the rich and the powerful. There is nothing (on the) left (Keucheyan, 2013). That is why the alignments between political parties, social issues and citizens are so chaotic and dysfunctional. The election of Donald Trump and Brexit were not accidents or odd events (Brabazon, Redhead, Chivaura, 2018). They are completely understandable and predictable in the context of claustropolitanism.

Steve Redhead developed this concept as a subtheme through his books, including *We have never been postmodern: theory at the speed of light* (2011). He critiqued the cosmopolitan sociology from Beck (2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2004), Lash (Lash and Featherstone, 2002), Bauman (1996), and Urry (Szerszynskiand and Urry, 2002). He recognized that the cosmopolitan sociologists failed to understand September 11, and failed to comprehend the Global Financial Crisis. Instead, scholars required new explanations for the state of the world, and our place in it.

The systems and structures for work, family, health, leisure, food and energy security, just to name a few variables, were already problematic for most of the population before Brexit, Trump and COVID-19. Lauren Berlant probed "the lifeworld of structure" (Berlant 2016, 393). As structures decay and decline, the 'lifeworld' within them corrodes and dies. Brexit summoned a lie that Britain was still a great power. Donald Trump attempted to 'Make America Great Again.' The 'again' is significant. COVID-19 revealed that a lack of attention and funding to public health has had and will continue to activate

profound consequences.  These three troubling and / or catastrophic events (September 11, the GFC and COVID-19), depending on your personal and political view, revealed the ugly truths of our economic, social and cultural reality.  This was a culture fuelled by blame, shame, ridicule, ignorance and confusion.  As Zygmunt Bauman confirmed in the midst of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's reconfiguration of neoliberalism, modernity was in crisis (1987).  Raewyn Connell argued that the 'crisis' of masculinity was part of this shredding of the self (2006).  The Incels (Involuntary Celibates) perpetuated this challenge to the gender order (Sharkey, 2022).  Supposedly, with men in crisis, it was necessary for women to be their rehabilitation.  The rise of Jordan Peterson as a "public intellectual" confirms the confusion of information and knowledge, misogyny and expertise (Brabazon, 2022).  Therefore – to summon and change a slice EP Thompson, claustropolitanism was present at its own making (1980).

**3. From conceptual hub to functional theory**
From the foundations configured by Paul Virilio and Steve Redhead, there is a workable theory to test.  However, the scholar developing this concept was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and died eight months later.  Embodying claustropolitanism, his illness remained a secret until the night of his death (Brabazon, 2020).  Even while managing Stage Four cancer in private, Redhead continued to research and work, without the pitying commentary or intellectual rubbernecking.  His book *Theoretical Times*(2017), that he wrote between his diagnosis and death, is marinated with death, despair and claustropolitanism.  He was able to hold a copy of the book just before he died.

Therefore, scholars are left with an intellectual stub, a concept sketched by a dying man.  This reality seems incredibly appropriate to the intellectual history of the concept.  It is not formed in a context of positivity, thriving, success and excess.  Instead, it is marinated in fear, loss, confusion, grief and death.  Shards of the concept's development survive in marginal media, including blog posts (Redhead, 2015), videos and podcasts.  From these marginal media, jig-saw puzzle pieces of a trope, theory and concept are aligned to create a vista of and for a new context.

Steve Redhead died well before COVID, but there are few more effective concepts to understand our recent history, and how to attempt to survive, live, teach and research in our present.  The final section of this article, exploring claustropolitanism as/ in a new interpretation of globalization, takes on this shard of a concept to render it complete and workable for a post-COVID world.  Through the death and despair, this article offers a new lens to interpret the end of the world, and / or an end to a particular rendering of globalization.

Claustropolitanism is a potent lens to research what COVID has done to the world, spanning from enforced isolation, masks, shortages, social distancing, sickness and death. Yet this concept is not only a way of theorizing the present, but offers a pathway into and through the post-COVID future, including strategies to survive and – perhaps - thrive.

Claustropolitanism is a global condition, but it is not the positive globalization of the cosmopolitan sociologists, celebrating the 'free' movement of money and people and ideas. This is a globalization of borders, refugees, racism, xenophobia, fear and infection. The claustropolitan lens focuses citizens and scholars on the foreclosing of the world. This is a world of danger, greed, toxicity and crowdedness. It is punctuated by workplaces at the end of the world, of labour surplus, unemployment, underemployment, the precariat, and zero hour contracts. Mobile phones are a prophylactic, to mitigate and protect from real-time communication, community and emotional intensity. Screens mask citizens from multi-sensory lived experiences, creating a world in miniature, lacking long term commitments, bouncing through ephemeral media, and looking down at a phone, as a proxy for living, rather than looking up, at multi-sensory environments. Life is gamified, scrolling through images on Instagram, distracted and medicated by a world we can never possess.

Scholars and citizens are trapped in and by screen. The world is shrinking. We want to get off. Get out. Instead, we are trapped. We are trapped by junk mortgages, homelessness, rental crises, the credit card economy, and excessive consumerism, to provide transitory relief, and micro pleasure. The structures that our parents and grandparents could depend on, such as stable families, stable work, stable housing, and faith structures, have been zombified. Experts and expertise is abused, ridiculed, or ignored. Scrolling through Tweets replaces reading scholarly monographs. Instead of confronting the horror of sickness, death, confusion and poverty, inelegant and nostalgic ideologies of men, women, families and religion continue to circulate on the screens of our culture.

There is no one to save us. There is no movement to harness social change. The left is dominated by identity politics. The right is dominated by hyper-individualisticself-absorption. It is increasingly difficult to build from me to we, or to migrate from scrolling to reading. The disconnection from history means that citizens are isolated, frightened and confused in a screen-based, hyper-individualized, consumerist dystopia. There is no hero. No light at the end of the tunnel. We are alone. In a tunnel. Wondering what is happening.

## 4. Higher Education at the end of the world

If there is any hope at the end of the world, then it must come from schools and universities. Learning is required. Yet our schools and universities are sick, toxic and decaying through decades of neglect, ridicule and a lack of funding. Dead assumptions have lead scholars to the university at the end of the world. The future is foreclosed. But by recognizing and understanding this tendency, the claustropolitanism lens will not only gift a future, but allow us to focus on our present to build a different and defiant future. If we sit in this moment – with consciousness and clarity – then researchers can observer the consequences of greed, ignorance, and self-absorption. Scholars and citizens can use the claustropolitanism lens to provide a sharp reframing of our times, to see alternatives.

The university sector is battered by market forces that have no connection with public education and high quality teaching and learning. In the year 2000, Aronowitz described higher education as "The Knowledge Factory" (2000). The separation of the sciences and the arts, serious and trivial, academic and popular culture, is used to confuse and agitate the reality of our lives. In our present, stuffed with death and disease and ignorance, a functional university was – and is - required to return information literacy to public debates(Brabazon, 2014), and to reshape the context into which we position and place our social, cultural, intellectual and political lives. The confusion of information and knowledge – facilitated through "The Google Effect" (Brabazon, 2006) – flattens public debate.

COVID capitalism lied to citizens and scholars, creating a ridiculous tug of war between health priorities and economic priorities. This was an artificial and irrational division. Afterall, dead people do not pay taxes. But by studying the sickness in capitalism, and the sickness of capitalism, researchers can acknowledge the ruthless reality of teachers and academics, medical and health professionals, couriers, and the service sector, the invisible, underpaid and unpaid people who allowed so many to live through a pandemic. This community has provided one pathway to our future. This is a rebuilding and reconfiguration of caring in capitalism, and caring and capitalism, but also renewed rigour and attention to regulation and governance.

Our universities are in a sorry state. They were troubled before COVID. All crises only intensify what already exists. Problematic policies about teaching and assessment transformed into "Panic Learning" (Brabazon, Quinton and Hunter, 2020). However the claustropolitan lens demands that citizens ask – at every moment of decision making - what is in the public good? This is not and has never been a rhetorical question. It is a productive inquiry in its horror and confusion. Scholars must discuss – rather than assume or marginalize –

the configuration and reconfiguration of knowledge, learning, teaching and research.

Claustropolitanism is a lens that allows scholars to realize, perhaps with disgust, repulsion, fear, shock, dread and terror, that the tools in our intellectual kitbag are infected, and they are killing us, alongside provocative and difficult knowledge. Instead, claustropolitanism asks that we understand knowledge in its fullness, scope and complexity, not a calcification of the humanities and social sciences, carolled back into traditional disciplines, lacking both courage and funding. Not a calcification of the sciences, lacking audacity and instead validatingbizarre and inelegant proxies such as the ranking of journals, citation metrics, outrageous open access fees, and industry partnerships that are as awkward as they are inappropriate.

The consequences of truncating and indeed restructuring out of universities an array of disciplines, methodologies and epistemologies, from blue sky science to the creative arts, is we now have gaps – gaping holes – in knowledge development in our universities. Zizek – even before COVID – described our era as the "new dark ages" (2014).

The Earth's population has suffered mega events. These events in and of themselves are important. But scholars must not allow what happened in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis - the active forgetting of the public bail out for private greed – to emerge once more, through the post-pandemic reassessment of health policies, climate debates, catastrophic wars of invasion and dispossession, and poverty (Streeck, 2014 ; Streeck, 2016; Tett, 2009). Memory and research must align to grasp the toxicity of the past and present, alongside the possible intellectual escape pods to our future.

## 5. Conclusion
Paul Virilio titled one of his books *The Administration of fear* (2012b). We as scholars must not allow fear to be administered. Fear must be addressed. Expertise must be confirmed. Effective public policy must developed, and the difficult work of consensus building - through community, connection and communication –is required. It is time to recommence this intellectual, social, cultural and political work.

The libertarians on the left and right will continue to create chaos, havoc and instability unless fears are defined and understood, and a functional consensus established to enable evidence-driven public policy, and careful governance and regulation (Hall, Winlow, Treadwell, 2016).

We as scholars and citizens have a choice.  We can administer fear in claustropolis, or we can lead with rigour and evidence into a future that has understood and remembered the mega events of the past.  We as academics can be complicit in neoliberalism that places economic value and individual choice ahead of regulation and governance.  The neoliberal subject – let alone the neoliberal student – must be resilient or they will be punctured and lost in vulnerabilty (Chandler and Reid, 2016).  We can make a different choice.  We can stand for a new research ethics, and be part of the project to discover new meaning and purpose for higher education, our nations, and the world.

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