

The claustropolitan society: A critical perspective on the impact of digital technologies and the lockdown imaginary

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Abstract

The imperative of this article is to develop the trope of the ‘lockdown imaginary.’ To enact this project, a diverse array of theories and theorists are summoned, including the tropes and trajectories from Jean Baudrillard, Benedict Anderson, and Steve Redhead. This – seemingly – odd intellectual combination is both timely and appropriate. It is necessary – as with the Matryoshka Dolls – to commence with a theorization of hyperreality, then we crack open the concept to reveal theories of the imagined and imagining, concluding with the smallest and most brutalizing theoretical Dolls: claustropolitanism and foreclosure. From here, a (post) pandemic lockdown is configured, an imagining that transcends the restrictive public health imperatives of COVID-19 and global lockdowns. This article captures the perpetuity of the pandemic. It will never be post. Instead, we argue that the lockdown imaginary will continue to foreclose thought, behavior, political choices, and life decisions. Through the claustropolitan sociological approach, we chart not only the lockdown imaginary but a way through ‘the end of the world’ by naming its destructive tendencies.

Keywords

Claustropolitanism, COVID-19 Studies, (Post)pandemic, lockdown imaginary, Digitalization

Introduction

It is thirty years since Jean Baudrillard (in)famously proclaimed the hyperreality of the contemporary world and presented Disneyland as a metonym, explaining how the real has been replaced with a collection of false images and simulations. For Baudrillard (2017, p. 370), ‘[t]he Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real.’ It exists to veil the uncomfortable and frightening reality that all the America that surrounds it is as real (and unreal) as the carefully scripted and stylized characters that trot around medieval castles. Disneyland, of course, can only serve such a function if we play active roles in its theatres of

hyperreality. We willfully adapt our language, intentions, and behavior so to reframe the possibilities of consciousness offered by Disneyland. We play along as if Micky Mouse was not a costume inhabited by a person. By living this lie – even temporarily - we allow ourselves to experience the magic of the imaginary. Disneyland invites a wilful suspension of disbelief in fairy tales. This suspension is not only for our own enjoyment. It summons and occupies an active forgetting that Disneyland surrounds us in more than a momentary, fleeting fiction from which we must inevitably depart. Disneyland is a deliberate and self-induced schism in our consciousness, one so severe that it appears as the antithesis of reality when it conceals the fact that the real is “no longer real” (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 369).

At first, and with the full – if ambivalent – force of postmodern tendencies and trajectories, it may seem an odd segue from a discussion of Disneyland to one that will focalize the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a closer consideration of the hyperreal instrumentality of both is useful for the development of a claustropolitan sociological approach. This alternative intellectual trajectory is considered through the remainder of this paper. The contention probed is that global lockdowns, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, have served similar functions for hyper-digital societies as Disneyland has for consumer societies. That is, just as Disneyland is no more or less real than the rest of America that surrounds it, the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions experienced during global lockdowns are no more or less false, temporal, artificial, or momentary than those experienced pre- or post-pandemic. When citizens began emerging from those lockdowns, masked, cautious, and still socially distanced, it was tempting to give way to the sense that ‘normality’ had begun to return. However, just as Baudrillard warns us about the false dichotomy that is the real and hyperreal, we must emerge out of global lockdowns with caution and resist the temptation to dismiss the conditions of the lockdowns as momentary afflictions on our ‘normal’ lives.

There is no ‘new normal.’ There is no normal. The intense claustrophobia we witnessed in lockdown merely disguised the fact that, what we might call, the ‘lockdown imaginary’ has been with us for some time. Far from our hyperconnected and increasingly digitalized worlds bestowing never-ending transnational possibilities upon us, the effects of foreclosure, an acceleration of culture, rapid societal change, spatial confinement, the invasiveness of surveillance technologies, an overload of domesticity and neoliberal economic pressures, tensions, and expectations have been a feature of our societies at least since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008. The lockdown imaginary then is a conceptual move, one that reframes the global lockdowns. Individuals were confined spatially, but also socially, culturally, economically, and coerced to upskill digitally. These moments in time filtered from our lives the everyday punctuations that perpetuate the illusion of freedom and progress. We take an obverse view of global lockdowns, one that asks us to understand them as exposés and crude distillations of the lives we live in the claustropolitan society. This paper not only offers a critical lens on the ‘new normal,’ but it also exposes the clawing, dangerous, toxic, and frightening claustrophobia of our society and the inherent claustrophobia through which lockdowns have served and serve to subvert our consciousness. Imagined communities, information capitalism, and medicalized societies duel, strut, converge, and struggle. This investigation of the pervasiveness of ‘the lockdown imaginary’ commences with attention to one part of that compound noun.

Imagined and Imaginary

The influence of a scholar can be demonstrated when one word summons their legacy. Benedict Anderson’s (1983) book for Verso, *Imagined Communities*, demonstrated the historic arc of a nation. It was an ‘imagined community.’ For Anderson, the nation was ‘both inherently limited and

sovereign' (1983, p. 15). The specificity of Marxism outside of Europe – in China, Cambodia, and Vietnam – was framed through nationalism. He argued that,

The reality is quite plain: the 'end of the era of nationalism' so long prophesied is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nationness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time (ibid., p. 12)

These national ideologies enact closure, bracketing questions of who is excluded, marginalized, invisible, or ignored. When 'race' and 'nation' rub, for instance, the results are catastrophic. Refugee and immigration policies and citizenship rituals attempt to manage nationalism through an often-tenuous consensus that is performed through a benevolent socialization which is guarded and framed by the agents of law and order. Particular languages and religious behaviors are valued over others. Yet, such patterns are tenuous. Anderson's argument aligns the rise of print capitalism with the imagining of nationalism. Print was commodified and secularized, creating the spaces for new languages of power alongside new injustices. Anderson confirmed that "the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation" (1983: p. 49). The key argument to transpose from Anderson's stark and landmark text is that an imagining is configured through semiotic systems, which shape the narratives composed within it.

Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' is more than a footnote or a slogan to title a lecture slide. As we build the lockdown imaginary in this article, the fingerprints of Anderson remain on our intellectual palette. That is because he provides critical insight into the necessity for people to imagine themselves into something larger than what materially exists around them and that they rely on technology to do this. Thus, when communities and nations are rapidly and suddenly compressed, transformed, and performed through an almost exclusively digital world - delivered to them by Wi-Fi – it invokes a psychological schism so profound that the nation must be repetitively (re)imagined in the mind of the citizen. Some of these rebooted (re)imaginings fail and result in riots, occupations, and fights in supermarkets over toilet paper. During global lockdowns, deterritorialization, disintermediation, and digitalization were pivotal in this reimagination, which was framed – cramped – by domesticity. Cut adrift from our communities, isolated and alone, we (re)imagined the world beyond the home in such a manner that it is difficult to simply undo and return ourselves to what came before. Therefore, the next section probes the morphology of this lockdown imagining.

Claustropolitanism

Claustropolitanism is a theoretical, political, and social sensibility or tendency. It captures, perpetuates, and frames the foreclosing of the world and the implosive effects of globalization. Workplaces at the end of the world are staffed by the precariat, zero-hour contract staff, with unemployment and under-employment remaining the toxic alternatives. Smartphones ensure that citizens look down at digitized distractions rather than up at the hot, disappointing, and deadly present. Liking, loving, reposting, and scrolling create a micro-present, bouncing between intense but ephemeral commitments. We view a world that is never ours to own and experience. It is seen through miniaturized digital technologies. Such an environment creates paranoia and irrationality and perpetuates a sense of powerlessness. The only light at the end of the tunnel is that of a freight train hurtling towards us, gaining speed and getting ever closer.

Appropriately, claustropolitanism was developed by a dying man at the ‘end’ of the world. Steve Redhead, developed the notion of ‘claustropolitanism’ to grapple with the consequences of ‘accelerated culture’ and saw it as a useful conceptual tool for sociologists and cultural studies theorists:

The French urban theorist Paul Virilio has controversially argued that we are moving from cosmopolis to claustropolis. My notion of claustropolitanism, developing the ideas from a spark lit by Virilio, denotes a contemporary cultural condition where we are starting to feel ‘foreclosed,’ almost claustrophobic, wanting to stop the planet so we can get off, well away from our ‘mobile accelerated nonpostmodern culture’ or MANC or ‘nonpostmodernity’ (2015: p. 1).

Redhead (2015) contended that we now inhabit a post-catastrophic world and suggests that global mega-events like the GFC should be understood as reality-altering ruptures that demand new ontologies and theories to make sense of emerging social, political, economic, and cultural changes. These elisions are not merely rhetorical. Their severity and material impact are personified by the political system in Britain – a country once seen as a bastion of pragmatism and highly mature democracy – burning through five Prime Ministers in six years. This is government at the end of the world.

Redhead also argued that claustropolitanism was a global condition. Significantly, claustropolitanism was not developed in a safe intellectual space, housed in an elite university, while occupying a tenured position. He moved from Manchester (UK) to Perth (Australia), to Brighton (UK), to Oshawa (Canada), and Bolton (UK) in less than a decade, managing volatile and ruthless university systems (Brabazon, 2020; Brabazon and Redhead, 2016). From this cascading toxicity, claustropolitanism started to appear in early references. Redhead then began to build claustropolitanism – as a theory of the world – in regional New South Wales and Adelaide in South Australia. It was enfolded in his Theoretical Times project (Redhead, 2017). The trope developed through marginal media, including blogs and podcasts (Brabazon and Redhead, 2014), and was applied through Trump Studies (Brabazon et al., 2018). Through these publications, “a shard of theory, an intellectual stub” (Brabazon, 2021a: p. 5) survived Steve Redhead’s death from pancreatic cancer. Since his death in March 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic, the January 6 uprising in Washington, the ‘Freedom Convoy’ in Canada, and the occupation of central Wellington in Aotearoa / New Zealand in 2022 have confirmed the foreclosure of the world (Brabazon, 2022). Excessive consumerism – intensified through inflation and the unsustainable rise in food and fuel prices – offers transitory relief and micro-pleasure. Traditional authority structures continue to zombify. Experts are ignored. Scrolling replaces reading. Jordan Peterson becomes the celebrity intellectual of this time (Brabazon, 2021b), summoning nostalgic family structures, masculinity, femininity, and Christianity while also ‘managing’ a clonazepam addiction. That a self-help writer, a proponent of self-reliance and the importance of personal decisions, became addicted to a prescription drug and required lengthy stays in rehabilitation centers in Russia and Serbia captures confusion and inconsistencies in simulacrum scholarship.

This period can be described as an interregnum (Babic, 2020), following on from Antonio Gramsci as reconfigured by Wolfgang Streeck (Streeck, 2016a; Streeck, 2017). As claustropolitanism consumes and crushes intellectual culture, it activates Baudrillard’s double refusal (1985) and Beck’s (2002) zombie concepts. Leaders refuse to lead, and citizens refuse to follow. This double reflex then zombifies the very concept of ‘leadership.’ The word is used. It continues to walk through strategic plans, vision statements, and performance reviews. But, it is empty of meaning. This voiding of

content in a toxic, brutalizing, and brittle context is most strongly revealed in the university sector. Claustropolitanism reveals the consequences of a higher education system destroyed by pre-GFC zombified ideologies of neoliberalism. This ideology – of economic efficiency, arbitrary metrics, and rolling restructures – is completely inappropriate for teaching, learning, and research. The invention of inelegant proxies for competence, achievement, and excellence has separated the sciences from the humanities, the serious and trivial, and the academic from popular culture. The (post)expertise university was unable to intervene in ‘public policy’ that, during the pandemic and lockdown, had parked the public (good), creating the arbitrary and – indeed – deathly separation of health and economic priorities. This was Covid capitalism. Gus O’Donnell (quoted in Tett, 2021: p. 74), a former head of the British civil service, stated in September 2020,

The government’s incorporation of expertise from behavioral and other human sciences has been woeful ... When the government says it ‘follows the science,’ this really means that it follows the medical sciences which has given it a one-sided perspective and led to some questionable policy decisions.

Covid-19 was the Disneyland of disease. The toxic binary opposition of health versus economics – death versus money – concertinaed the capacities for robust, evidence-driven decision-making. This is claustropolitanism, squeezing the notions of the real, the possible, and the true.

Claustropolitanism is a theory for the end of the world. Redhead’s theory was not derived from a health emergency but from the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007-2008. It is a theory of provocation to ‘make the end of the world great again.’ While the concept offers theories of toxicity, fear, rage, and anger, including towards social, economic, and health systems, claustropolitanism found its moment in the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the way it frames, shapes and textures its major theoretical contribution - foreclosure. The deaths from COVID-19 were horrific. Extremely sick humans were isolated. Short of breath. Sense of smell lost. Multi-organ failure. Body bags and freezer trucks parked adjacent to hospitals for the overflow of bodies. Funeral attendance restricted. Globalization – and the free movement of people, money, and goods – stopped with a shunt and a shock. Without a vaccine, social distancing was the only way to control the contagion. With a peak death rate between January and April 2020, cycles of social distancing and lockdowns summoned a claustropolitan choreography. This dance – between neoliberal economic ‘growth’ (actually, economic survival) and public health priorities – demonstrated the lack of value, priority, and importance granted to the life and health of most of the population. Clinging onto the edge of life, leisure, work, and solvency, claustropolitanism provides the frame, the rationale, and an understanding of how the pandemic transformed the interpretation of reality, truth, evidence, and fact.

As with all endings, myriad beginnings are enfolded within it. Theories of the end of the world were present before COVID-19 and have been foundational to science fiction as a genre and Zombie Studies as an intellectual (post)discipline. Trump Studies, Brexit Studies, Extreme Anthropology, Post-Digital Studies, and Unpopular Cultural Studies all emerged before the pandemic. Yet, as event after event – war after war – crisis after crisis – erupted after September 11, arbitrary exclusions that were perpetuating centuries of xenophobia and racism, activated a cascading irrationality of (hyper)reality. National imaginings were infected by historic claims for social justice to reconcile the genocidal consequences of colonization. The Global Financial Crisis destroyed millions of lives. Yet, after the public bailout of private banks where bankers were treating other people’s money like the stake in casino capitalism, political amnesia emerged. Crouch (2011) described this as *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*. With funding voided from public health, publication, and public libraries,

private banks parked, marginalized, and masked the scale of their errors and continued making irrational decisions fuelled by greed rather than the public good. A few individuals – bad apples – did not create the GFC. Instead, Tett (2009: 26) researched the derivative trading at the time and discovered a ‘dancing around the regulators.’ People were harmed through the behaviors of traders, yet because these harms were not named, punished, ridiculed, and remembered; this harm became normalized. Donald Trump became President of the United States. Britain left the European Union. Anti-regulatory rhetoric and anti-statism from Trump and Brexit were built on the active forgetting of the GFC. Whalen (2017) recognized the cost of this active forgetting.

Perhaps the biggest change for all financial services companies and professionals in 2017 is that the political narrative regarding financial regulation has shifted from a punitive, anti-business focus to a more traditionally conservative agenda focused on growth and jobs.

The normalization of this harm – perpetuated in the name of finance and real estate capitalism – meant that blame was displaced to refugees, migrants, ‘Marxists,’ North Korea, China, feminists, and the trans community. Actually, corruption and the displacement of regulation and governance needed to be addressed. Because these behaviors were not critiqued, there was a normalization of risk. However, there would be an appropriately zombie ending to this corporate tale. With public institutions suffering a reduction in funding because of the bailouts, they were underprepared for a crisis. This lack of resourcing and planning became clear and deadly through COVID-19.

Universities and the academics housed within them were neither prepared nor funded to research the lockdown imaginary. Instead, through the 2000s and 2010s, too many gatekeepers justified the ranking of journals and empty words like ‘impact’ and ‘engagement.’ Claustropolitanism, as a descriptor, emerged through a critique of sociological ‘business as usual.’ Since September 11, cosmopolitan sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash did not possess an explanatory or interpretative palette. Indeed, benevolent, multicultural cosmopolitanism continued to be the answer to questions that were no longer asked. Therefore, claustropolitanism drew a paradigmatic line under cosmopolitanism. Instead of hopeful multiculturalism, paranoid anger and fear became the punctuating tropes for most people across the globe. Citizens were closed in – foreclosed – trapped in cycles of consumerism to provide purpose and momentum. At the same time, the remaining social structures of family, work, and leisure became not only zombie concepts and infected but shambling through the landscape, perpetuating the contagion.

The intellectual, social, and political problem that was addressed by claustropolitanism was nostalgia. As Rutherford (2000: p. 37) presciently confirmed:

There is a paradox. Changes are occurring faster in people’s consciousness than in their behavior and social conditions. This mixture of new consciousness and old conditions has created what he [Beck] describes as zombie categories – social forms such as class, family, or neighborhood, which are dead yet alive.

The pandemic intensified the zombie concepts, which included public health, higher education, work, hope, happiness, and life. These terms were still used but were ideological husks filled with toxic, shambling content. Yet, even in the shadow of September 11, Beck noted that ‘human dignity, cultural identity and otherness must be taken more seriously in the future’ (2002, 48). Beck’s hopes have yet to be realized. Indeed, human dignity has been denied for a large minority of the global

population from whom capital cannot be extracted. There was – and is – no hope to be found in globalizing multiculturalism. Instead, ‘the state,’ which was so overtly critiqued by the cosmopolitan sociologists as a problem because of its domination and rigidity, became the only salve through COVID-19. The state was the only prophylactic through the pandemic. Regulations, restrictions, and mandates were the only strategy for survival at the end of the world. The anti-statism of the cosmopolitan sociologists enabled the celebration of multiculturalism, identity, and community. Therefore, punchy, overt, and clear intellectual critique of anti-statism created the gap – the spaces – for un(der)regulated neoliberalism. This problem intensified as the zombie concepts of ‘family,’ ‘work,’ and ‘productivity’ continued circulating. Zombies are not only infected. They move. They spread the contagion to words like ‘choice,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘agency,’ and ‘expertise,’ emptying them of meaning, hope, and purpose. Krossa (2012: p. 17) confirmed that, “a central question of sociological research for many decades has been how to integrate societies, and in a stricter sense, how to bring the aspect of heterogeneity under some control”. Her prediction was accurate. Without attention to integration and building consensus – or even a structure and vocabulary for civilized debates - all sorts of new ‘fighting rights’ emerged during the pandemic, such as fights over toilet paper (Nguyen, 2020), the ‘choice’ to not wear a mask, and the right to not be vaccinated. Therefore, what is in the ‘public good’? This phrase – after the Global Financial Crisis – was also zombified. The public good had been eaten from within, but the shell continued its zombie walk, infecting institutions that were assumed to be stable, consistent, and dependable.

With cosmopolitanism discharged through chaotic and catastrophic events, claustropolitanism has squeezed into the temporal and spatial deficit at the end of the world. This end of the world – and modernity - is composed of iterative endings. Endings begin and are then discharged by the beginning of the next ending. There was also no clear beginning to claustropolitanism. It was not born in the burning buildings of September 11. Tragically, 2996 people died, and suicide and illness killed many ‘survivors’ and first responders. But, September 11 merely demonstrated the lack of effective analytical tools deployed by the cosmopolitan sociologists. One origin of this claustropolitan ending is the Global Financial Crisis. Not only was the banking system destroyed in 2007-2008, but belief in the rationality, logic, professionalism, and predictability of finance capitalism was also crushed. Banks were ‘too big to fail,’ and through their zombified survival, public health and education were left to wither. Transformational infrastructural projects to enable the blue economy, the green economy, and interventions in the landscape to manage and mitigate climate change were delayed and marginalized.

This intensification of irrationality jugged from the damaged capitalism of the GFC. Wolfgang Streeck (2014; 2016b) logged this trajectory before Trump, Brexit, and the pandemic in his books *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism and How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*. The notion of a ‘delayed crisis’ is crucial. The recurrent parking of preventative health and infrastructural development did not save public finances. Instead, short-termism hocked the future for the political survival of the few in the present.

As we noted earlier, the claustropolitan approach commenced as a reaction to cosmopolitan sociological approaches and their difficulties in explaining the rise of national populism across the globe as well as other self-destructive events such as Brexit. At risk of oversimplification, cosmopolitan sociology is concerned with the social, cultural, and financial possibilities, modalities, conflicts, and power games that have ‘opened up’ beyond the nation-state and thus argues for more of a concentrated, theoretical, and empirical focus on global sociological effects and transnationalisms (Beck and Grande, 2010). Many of its aims - such as its desire to highlight the effects of global inequality, challenge narrow methodological nationalisms and confront views of

sociology as objective and value-free - are laudable, and helpfully distinguishes it from earlier sociological approaches of modernity. In its ambitions to 'open up', however, it risks overlooking the greater significance of what is 'closing in' and the implications of this foreclosure. The COVID-19 pandemic is a further watershed moment for digital societies (Lawrence and Crawford, 2021), one that has brought about a dramatic and far-reaching transformation of reality. Therefore, the next part of our article cracks open the next Matryoshka Doll: informational capitalism.

Digitalization and informational capitalism

The rapid acceleration towards the digital during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ease with which the state reached across civil-domestic boundaries, impinging on liberties, have merely intensified and sped a collective sense of claustrophobia. As we came to terms with these new hyperdigital conditions, we were plunged - and plunged ourselves yet further - into the digital realm to play, cope, distract, escape and/or educate. The Internet replaced the gym, the pub, and trips to extended family members, with Les Mills Online and Zoom Parties becoming inelegant replacements. Creative and odd popular culture moments emerged through walking the bin to the curb for collection (Bin Isolation Outing, 2020). TikTok dances shared movements through disintermediated digital platforms. Pastimes that demanded copresence were reimaged and reconfigured in such a way that they were antithetical to what they were before COVID-19. As lockdown days, weeks, and years merged into each other, the monotony of enacting the same patterns and behaviors, in the same place, took its toll. The lockdown imaginary, a psyche we had to create to cope with the claustrophobia induced by domesticity but have found impossible to transcend as we emerged from lockdowns, has permanently changed the globe and created an environment of febrility and panic. Whether or not it fundamentally changed the claustropolitan path we were on or whether it simply accelerated the rate of change, is less clear.

What is certain is that an acceleration towards greater levels of digital literacy, technological expansion, and development has closed the gaps between the physical and digital space around us. As American English is the dominant and founding language of the Internet, there are cultural as well as linguistic consequences to heightened exposure to digitalization. Schneider (2000) stated that,

As Americans become more wired, the wired world becomes more like America. And what do most Americans do – online and elsewhere? They shop. They gab with friends. They follow their favorite teams, decide what movie to see, and track their mutual funds. Occasionally, maybe (and most likely just before an election) they check in on the world of politics.

This imagining that commenced in the 21st century and which would become an axiom of the lockdown imaginary forecloses us with specific nodes of digitalized cultural life: sport, shopping, and finance. To foreclose is to remove predictability, to lose something that is precious, on which the patterns and structures of the local and the imagined are based. There is a violence to foreclosure, removing the punctuation and patterning of our lives and geography; at no time was this more obvious than during lockdowns. In the claustropolitan society, the truths of our experiences are revealed to be lies, and the facts of nationalism, race, sexuality, and gender are revealed to be imaginary. The certainties of family, work, leisure, and life are lost, or – even more damagingly – endlessly displaced. The reconciliation between the stories we have told ourselves about our lives and the (hyper)reality of our lives are only reconciled through the silence of death.

The artificially accelerated – panicked – foreclosure created a distortion in time during global lockdowns. We were forced into confined spaces in myriad ways that felt entirely abnormal, irregular, odd, and strange, all in double quick time. The longer we stayed home, while paradoxically maintaining an unbroken connection to the entire world, the more and more claustrophobic it felt. This aspect of the lockdown imaginary maps accurately to the post- (which was never really post) lockdown version of ‘the new normal.’ Long before lockdown was a word punctuating popular culture, we sought refuge in private space, whether that be domestic, work, or leisure. The smartphone made us perennially connected to others. The interface between the personal and the public was porous. Others invade our private space when it suits them and at our own behest. We consented to the invasion, contraction, and compression of the self. Think about WhatsApp’s ‘blue ticks,’ which indicate that the recipient of a message has ‘read’ its content, and the emergence of cultural expectations of a timely response. Now consider the consequences of taking an arbitrary amount of time to type a reply the sender deems to be too long. This is in stark opposition to the notion that digital technologies arouse our social and cultural worlds into a state of cosmopolitan extravaganza, delighting us with the unending possibilities of consumption, sociality, and mobility. In the claustropolitan society, the expectations of others foreclose, intensify, and multiply upon us--from which we have no escape.

Digital technologies are not themselves defining the claustropolitan society. Instead, the culture around the platforms and interfaces are impelled by the logic of informational modes of capitalism. Information capitalism is a different economic system from consumer capitalism. It accrues surplus value by way of selling ‘symbolic, ‘immaterial,’ informational commodities’ and requiring of the producer and consumer ‘cognitive, communicative and co-operative labour’ (Fuchs, 2014, p. 54). It is thus a very particular expression of the violence of neoliberalist ideology, one that has adapted and made itself fit for the (hyper)digital world. It operates with an attention economy at its heart. It competes with itself to submerge consciousness within the digital realm, promising convenience, ubiquity, accessibility, and individualization, but just as consumer capitalist economies do, it leaves us with fear, confusion, doubt, and self-loathing. The agents that seek to persuade us to stay logged on are not embodied sales assistants. Instead, they are artificial forms of intelligence, which are perpetually deployed at the same time as we are online to monitor digital activities before algorithmically foreclosing us with narrow, targeted content, information, opinions, products, and people designed to perpetuate and reproduce our biases, with ever greater speed and efficiency. The digital echo chamber, in which we see and hear only those people who we agree with us, is claustropolitanism distilled.

A key enabler and producer of our claustropolitan digital culture is the underlying demand for metric data, which are devoured and metabolized by algorithms, themselves subject to review of their performance. These data of course are the lifeblood of informational capitalism because they are supposed to allow for better financial decisions. According to Ajana (2018: p. 1):

Over the years, their use and function have expanded to cover every sphere of everyday life, so much so that it can be argued that we are now living in a ‘metric culture,’ a term indicating the growing cultural interest in numbers and a culture that is increasingly shaped by numbers ... At the same time, metric culture is not only about numbers and numbers alone, but also links to issues of power and control, to questions of value and agency, and to expressions of self and identity.

Currently, many significant public institutions are governed by a metric-driven approach, facilitated by digital technologies that gather vast amounts of data, and motivated by a political desire to measure the efficacy of these institutions and individuals. Given, in the United Kingdom at least, the major successes of healthcare providers, hospitals, universities, leisure centers, schools, police, and other public institutions responsible for wellness, health, and fitness are not mainly evaluated based on their profit margins; metrics have also been used as proxies to attempt to quantify success and discern quality. However, according to Muller (2018), the 'tyranny of metrics' has failed to accomplish this and has severely eroded confidence in institutions' integrity and the knowledge produced within them. The imposition of metrics has a dramatic effect on an organization's working culture and incentivises behaviors and actions that are not indicative of quality per se but may result in a higher metric score. The 'spectacle of excellence' as per spreadsheets and surveys becomes the institutional goal, not 'excellence' in and of itself.

Metrics offer a series of inelegant proxies for quality, significance, health, and importance, but they nonetheless continue the zombie dance as if they hold meaning, gravitas, and significance. The fundamental predicament lies in the fact that the active consumption of healthcare, universities, sport, leisure centers, schools, police, and other public institutions are critiqued and undermined by an experiential reality that each user holds. While the nostalgic belief in these institutional imaginings may be comforting, the lived experience is disappointing, demeaning, and brutalizing. This has a preponderant influence in molding (mis)faith because it supersedes the quantum enshrined in spreadsheets. Metric culture is pivotal in revealing the lies told to us about our own lived experiences. It challenges embodied knowledges of the self and forces us to orientate our energies into the completely useless and futile act of maintaining the spectacle so the zombie dance can continue. As Debord (2006 [1967]) would have it, '[I]ike lost children we live our unfinished adventures,' desperately trying to maintain a sense of control in a world that is out of control and which does not want to confront the truths that are very apparent all around us. The rubbing of these porous surfaces and services weathers the skin of the self, medicalizing the rituals of citizenship.

Medicalization

The gradual and deepening medicalization of our collective existence in the West is a useful context to expand on and explore the deepening effects of metric culture and its invasive role in foreclosure and claustropolitanism more broadly. Not least because, like most features of the claustropolitan society, the pandemic whipped health-related fear into a frantic state, exposing what was always present but which now could no longer be ignored. The Boris Johnson Conservative Government in the United Kingdom, alongside the Scott Morrison Liberal Government in Australia, which was also conservative albeit with an Orwellian inversion encircling the word 'liberal,' configured a separation of health policies to 'manage' COVID-19 and economic policies to 'stimulate' the economy. Similarly, Donald Trump's Republican administration continued to validate the stock market while enacting briefings about the public health emergency. The arbitrary and destructive binary opposition of 'economics' and 'health' leveraged the life and death of citizens onto arbitrary daily press conferences, briefings, and updates. This daily feed of death, sickness, insecurity, and fear ensured the survival of neoliberalism. The bizarre and inelegant nature of this division between health and economics meant that risk and harm were normalized in the lockdown imaginary and fear paralyzed people from engaging in meaningful social interaction.

Even before the pandemic, modern medicine – the major regulator of 'normal' mental

and physical wellness, health, and fitness – had failed to address the limits of medicalization. As Lawrence (2023) notes, medicalization, or the process of bringing various aspects of life under the clinical gaze, has been criticized on a number of fronts for blurring the boundaries between pathology and social deviance, medicalizing normal but uncomfortable human emotions, serving the profit-driven motives of healthcare providers and funders, and, the overdiagnosis of benign abnormalities. The cumulative effect of these tendencies is powerful. It results in a public that is hyper-sensitive to issues of wellness, health, and fitness but is overwhelmed by the proliferation of medical knowledge and the rapid changes in guidance. This inevitably leads to an overconsumption of healthcare services, a lack of access to adequately funded providers, and a gradual shift to a reliance on (often) unqualified social media influencers as sources of medical knowledge. Coupled with the realities of a desolate landscape of economic instability, individuals are left to navigate health challenges on their own. Wellness and wellbeing discourse become social salves for physical and mental overload. Far from acting from positions of empowerment, we engage in self-help from a position of angst and desperation, hopeful that the promises made to us by neoliberal capitalism - that the market will provide the solution - are true.

Personalized health care plans and wearable tech will become even more important as the lockdown imaginary of increased individualism and domesticity persists post-pandemic. As invasive neoliberal solutions, they will be key in managing the accelerated sense of vertigo that accompanies pluralist and relativist epistemological terrains vis-à-vis self-health management. However, they are solutions that invite deep introspection, encouraging us to open ourselves to the logic of the quantified self and succumb to digital technologies that invade our bodies and then spew the self out in the form of numbers on a smartphone screen. This is the logical conclusion of a wellness, health, and fitness culture that has been progressively moving away from co-present interaction - a process that begins with the commercial production of personal music players and earphones in the 1980s - to an entire industry based on bespoke, invasive, and foreclosing technologies, such as personalized nutrition plans, MyFitnessPal accounts, the Apple Watch and noise-canceling earphones. We have never known so much and so little about ourselves at any one time. The more we know, the more we know we do not know.

This quantified self, which shapes the self-monitored fitness ‘movement,’ compresses the space between self-monitoring and surveillance, motivation, and shaming. The ‘quantified self’ was a phrase that was first summoned by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly in 2007 (Wolf, 2009). Unsurprisingly, it was published in *Wired* magazine. Life was not to be lived but to be tracked and mapped. This quantified self was a commodified self, with this personal data revealing commercial value. This was not the World Wide Web, but a narrow, personalized, commercialized portal. Significantly, this self-monitoring grew, and the Global Financial Crisis erupted. It accompanied austerity (Blyth, 2013), scarcity (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2014), zombie capitalism (Harman, 2010), and the precariat (Standing, 2011). With the exhaustion of the labor force, it is not surprising that through claustropolitanism, economic value is extracted from leisure and from the fear and panic created and perpetuated by the lockdown imaginary. This is re-proletarianization and the monetization of supposedly non-working time (Brabazon and Redhead, 2014). While these arbitrary metrics of steps, cardio minutes, standing, and movement appear to saturate our world with facts and information, they also intensify competition about irrelevant variables, and summon and disseminate cultures of blame, shame, and faux competition. Motivation is transposed for self-loathing. Therefore, from this self, shaped by judgment and arbitrary targets, the lockdown imaginary is shaped and perpetuated.

Lockdown as the trope for the end of the world

Lockdowns were complex formations. With only essential services open and expansive unemployment and public subsidies emerging, innovative and bizarre (post)work and leisure cultures emerged with evermore extreme political ire attached to them. The 'Lockdown Rebellion' erupted in some cities in the United States. An array of grievances was enfolded in this resistance to the lockdown, including the denial of climate change and anti-abortion activism. Still, COVID-19 deniers were a small slice of this vocal minority of post-Tea Party populists. Part of their critique was the right to shop and work. Once more, the arbitrary separation of economic and health concerns – money and death – created illogical debates and resistances. The right to die for a haircut, purchase toilet paper, or a meal at a restaurant were zombie rights for citizenship at the end of the world.

As the lockdown imaginary has seeped into the collective consciousness, the radical beliefs of libertarian free marketers and their conceptions of individuality and choice were exercised in increasingly absurd ways, prioritizing personal freedoms over the public good. This desire for agency is certainly not problematic in and of itself. Conversely, it speaks to the consequences of the claustropolitan society. The lockdown, and our inability to emerge from it seamlessly, is a cautionary tale about the dangers of continuing to live in a claustrophobic state, which denies space for conversations about alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, unequivocally dismisses all Trump and Brexit voters as bigots and racists and insists on accelerated systems and ways of being. In the simplest of terms, as Connolly (2000: p. 596) has described it, 'when speed accelerates, space is compressed', and it is the social and economic implications that emerge from the elisions between speed, acceleration, culture, (digital) technology, compression, spatiality, and change to which we suggest social and cultural scholars pay close attention. It is only in this paradigm that more complex sociological explanations can emerge. We have been here before, though, in the wake of the GFC. Foreclosure and similarly invasive capitalistic tropes returned very soon after the GFC and in similarly brutish ways to continue punctuating people's lives. Continuing in the same way will have equally dire consequences.

The defining aspect of claustropolitanism, simply put, is that as the world is opened to us, we are also opened to the world. Laid bare for all to see. The consequences of this exchange are toxic fear, confusion, misdirected rage, and displacement. As our foreclosed future collides with the present, we must resist the invasive forces that seek to naturalize risk and introduce arbitrary and granulating metrics into every aspect of our lives. We must counter the temptation to distract ourselves with consumerism, meaningless political slogans, and economic solutions that revert to the same neoliberal dogma and instead hold open the space for alternative possibilities. The lockdown imaginary endures, but it does not have to, which is why this paper has delved into the spectral realm of the lockdown imaginary, to call for transcendence beyond the claustrophobic sociological conditions that have shaped the general malaise and disillusionment of the immediate post-lockdown moment. As we navigate the unprecedented shrinkage of global workforces, the failures of students to return to campus, and the uptick in antisocial behavior, we must confront the ghosts of our claustropolitan past and present and the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated our journey towards domesticity, digital isolation, and introspection. The end of this journey is yet to be determined, but by embracing the warnings that are inherent and fashioned out of the lockdown imaginary, we may be able to forge a path towards new, more progressive, and optimistic horizons.

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