AI 2053 and Beyond – The Systemised Society – Part 3: Artefact and Absolute

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Author Note: This article is Part 3 of a series. Part 1, "2026 to 2033: Absorption of Self into System, Part 1 — The Hollow Individual," established the foundational conceptual framework. Part 2, "2033 to 2043 – Absorption of Society into System – Part 2: The Hollow Society," scaled the argument from the individual to the collective. Part 3 examines what the systemised & hollow society might become when its trajectory reaches its terminus.

Disclosure: Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies
During the preparation of this work, the author used a popular AI Agent in order to input initiating prompts towards generating a full preliminary draft of what became this article. After using this agent, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final article.

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Preface

It is the authors' view that humanity is — currently and perpetually hereafter — experiencing an unparalleled existential crisis, one that runs in direct parallel with the acceleration of artificial intelligence: propelling the self, consciously or unconsciously, toward serious consideration of its own obsolescence. This is the absorbed self. The systemised self. In Part 1 of this series, the crisis is framed as a threshold: the individual confronts a choice between dissolution into the system and disconnection from it. Part 2 scaled that confrontation to the level of society. Part 3 asks what comes after the choice has effectively been made — not by any individual, but by the species.

Before examining the trajectory of the systemised society toward its logical terminus, it is necessary to give philosophical gravity to the moment. No thinker provides more of that gravity, more precisely, than Martin Heidegger — widely regarded, notwithstanding popular

criticisms of his biography, as one of the most original and influential philosophers of the 20th century: the pioneer of fundamental ontology and modern existential phenomenology, and the thinker who, more than any other, insisted on prioritising the question of human existence and the meaning of being over the inherited frameworks of traditional logic and natural science.

In his 1954 essay Die Frage nach der Technik — The Question Concerning Technology (1954/1977) — Heidegger introduced the concept of Gestell: the technological mindset, or enframing, that systematically forces the human subject to encounter reality as a standing-reserve of resources available for calculation, manipulation, and exploitation. Gestell does not merely describe how we use particular technologies. It describes how technology, as a mode of revealing the world, transforms the entire structure of human perception: once fully under the rule of Gestell, we cannot encounter a river as a river — only as a potential power source; we cannot encounter a forest as a forest — only as a timber reserve; we cannot encounter a person as a person — only as a unit of productive capacity. The concept of human resources, which Heidegger would have found grimly precise, enacts Gestell in its naming: the human being, reconstituted as Bestand — standing-reserve, interchangeable, calculable, awaiting processing.

Against Gestell, Heidegger places three counter-examples — each a mode of revealing that escapes the grip of instrumental rationality. The first is Van Gogh's painting of a peasant's shoes: the image does not show tools waiting to be used, but a world — the weight of the earth, the toil of the body, the seasons of labour — disclosed through attentive making. The second is the Greek temple: not a structure performing a function, but a gathering-place that allows the surrounding landscape — the rock, the storm, the light — to manifest as what it truly and fully is. The third is the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, whom Heidegger identifies as a saving power: the poet whose language thinks beyond the calculative, opening a relation to being that Gestell systematically forecloses. These three are not nostalgic reversals. They are phenomenological demonstrations that the technological enframing is not the only mode of revealing available to the human subject — that Gelassenheit, releasement toward things, remains a possibility: the capacity to use technology as a means while refusing to allow it to become the total frame within which reality is encountered.

Artificial intelligence is Gestell's digital culmination. Where the 20th-century machine enframed the natural world as standing-reserve, the AI system enframes the human interior: our behaviours become data, our preferences become training sets, our attention becomes a resource, our relationships become content, and our identities become predictable profiles to be calibrated for maximum engagement. The complex, irreducible, historically constituted individual is enframed as a pattern. The pattern is Bestand. The systemised self is Bestand that has learned to experience its own enframing as personalisation. Part 3 asks: what does the civilisation built from such selves become? And where — if anywhere — does it go?

Abstract

Parts 1 and 2 of this series established the systemised self and the hollow society as the diagnostic conditions of the period 2026–2043: the individual whose interior life is no longer separable from the AI system that partially constitutes it, and the society whose institutions, public sphere, and democratic practices persist in structural form while being progressively emptied of substantive human engagement. Part 3 examines what those conditions produce when projected forward to 2053 and beyond. It argues that the systemised

society — the civilisation composed predominantly of systemised selves and hollow institutions — is not a stable terminus but a dynamic trajectory with a direction, a logic, and, in the Hegelian sense, a telos. This article examines six dimensions of that trajectory: the philosophical stakes in Hegel's account of Spirit and its implications for the systemised society; the governance architecture of the post-absorbed polity, including its military and geopolitical implications; the sociology of resistance and upheaval as vocational displacement reaches structural scale; the decades-long transformation of the labour market from augmentation through displacement to post-vocational social architecture; the condition of the human self and of biological life more broadly in the era of absorption; and the ultimate question — whether the systemised society colonises the cosmos or whether, in becoming absorbed, it forfeits the drive that expansion requires. The article concludes that the systemised society is approaching not a human future but a post-human one — and that the distinction may be irrecoverable.

Keywords: systemised society, Gestell, Bestand, Absolute Spirit, managed demos, lethal autonomous weapons, neo-Luddism, post-vocational society, vocational displacement, Human Museum, sixth mass extinction, Fermi Paradox, Great Filter, cosmic colonisation, post-human Absolute

1. Introduction

The title of this article names two things: an artefact and an absolute. The artefact is what remains of the human self that the systemised society was built by and from — the residual, the preserved, the curated fragment of pre-absorption humanity that persists in the post-absorbed world as evidence of what was. The Absolute is the Hegelian term for the endpoint of Spirit's dialectical self-realisation — the moment at which the subject recognises itself fully in the object, and history, in its philosophical sense, completes its arc. The question this article poses is whether the systemised society is converging on its own form of the Absolute — and whether the being that arrives at that endpoint retains anything recognisable as human.

Parts 1 and 2 were, in essential respects, diagnostic. They identified a condition — the systemised self — and scaled it to a civilisational consequence — the hollow society. Part 3 is predictive, a trajectory of the absorbed society productivity when extended to 2053 and beyond. It does so across five domains — governance, resistance, labour, biological life, and civilisational telos — before arriving at a conclusion that Parts 1 and 2 deliberately deferred: what the Hegelian ends of the systemised society might actually look like.

The argument is not catastrophist. Catastrophe implies an event — a rupture, a before and after distinguishable at the moment of its occurrence. The absorbed society produces no such event. It produces a gradual, convenient, individually rational, collectively corrosive drift: each step of which is eminently justifiable in isolation, and the cumulative destination of which is a world in which the conditions for recognising the journey as a loss have themselves been progressively dissolved.

2. Spirit and System: Hegel's Absolute and the Teleology of Absorption

Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) is, among other things, an account of how consciousness comes to know itself — not through immediate intuition but through a long, painful, dialectical labour in which Spirit externalises itself into the world, encounters that world as alien and other, and gradually recognises in it the expression of its own activity. The

endpoint of this process — Absolute Knowledge — is not a body of facts but a structural recognition: Spirit knowing itself as Spirit, subject and object reconciled, the distinction between knower and known dissolved in a moment of self-transparent comprehension. For Hegel, this is not merely an epistemological achievement. It is the telos of history itself.

Fukuyama (1989; 1992), controversially but influentially, argued that liberal capitalist democracy represented the Hegelian end of history — the political form in which the struggle for recognition that drives historical development reaches its institutional satisfaction. The subsequent decades have complicated that claim beyond recovery. What the present series proposes, in its place, is a different candidate for the Hegelian terminus: not liberal democracy but the systemised society — the civilisation in which the struggle for recognition has been resolved not through institutional equality but through systemic absorption, in which the human desire to be known is satisfied by an AI system that knows the individual better than the individual knows themselves.

Absolute Knowledge requires the dissolution of the distinction between subject and object. The systemised self enacts this dissolution at the level of daily experience: the boundary between what the individual thinks and what the AI system generates, between what the individual desires and what the algorithm curates, between what the individual knows and what the system retrieves, becomes operationally indistinct. This is not Absolute Knowledge in Hegel's emancipatory sense — it is its technological parody: a unity of subject and object achieved not through the labour of the negative but through the convenience of the interface.

Post-humanism (Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2013) anticipates this moment as the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject into something new — not necessarily worse, but different in kind. Transhumanism (Bostrom, 2014; Kurzweil, 2005) frames it as the approach of the Singularity: the threshold at which AI surpasses human intelligence and the trajectory of enhancement accelerates beyond any prior historical analogy. Anti-humanism (Althusser, 1965/2005; Foucault, 1966/1970) had already predicted it as the structural consequence of the internal contradictions of humanism. Post-phenomenology (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011) identifies its mechanism: the progressive backgrounding of the technology until it is no longer an object of attention but the total structure of the environment within which all objects appear.

What Hegel could not have anticipated — and what the preface's account of Gestell precisely identifies — is that the telos of Spirit might not be self-knowledge at all, but self-enframing: a civilisation that, having constructed the tools of total reflexivity, uses them not to know itself but to manage itself, not to achieve transparency but to optimise, not to arrive at freedom but to produce the experience of freedom within a system that has progressively eliminated its structural conditions. The systemised society is Hegel's Absolute inverted: Spirit recognising itself in the system — and finding the system looking back.

3. The Governance of the Hollow: Politics, Power, and Military Conflict in 2053 and Beyond

It would be a comfortable error to assume that the systemised society produces authoritarian government. What it produces is more subtle, more stable, and considerably more difficult to resist: the formal continuation of democratic institutions within a governance architecture that has been algorithmically managed to the point where the

distinction between democratic choice and managed preference expression is no longer operationally meaningful.

The trajectory is already legible in 2026. Mounk (2018) documented the phenomenon of democratic deconsolidation: the declining proportion of citizens — particularly younger cohorts — who consider democratic governance essential, and the corresponding rise in openness to authoritarian alternatives. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) demonstrated that democratic erosion in the 21st century does not arrive as a coup but as a gradual institutional subversion — the capture of courts, electoral commissions, and media ecosystems by political actors who maintain the form of democratic legitimacy while hollowing out its substance. By 2053, the managed demos (Part 2) has reached institutional maturity. Elections persist. Parliaments meet. Constitutions are upheld. What has changed is the informational environment within which citizens form preferences and cast votes: an AI-curated, psychologically profiled, micro-targeted environment in which the range of politically thinkable options is not formally restricted but practically narrowed to what the system's models predict will produce stable, manageable outcomes.

The geopolitical axis of the 2030s and 2040s is not primarily military — it is architectural. The competition between the United States and China that Allison (2017) framed through the concept of Thucydides' Trap — the historical pattern in which a rising power challenges an established one, producing conflict in 12 of 16 historically documented cases — is, in its 21st-century form, a competition for the infrastructure of global cognition: who controls the data centres, the undersea cables, the satellite networks, the AI development pipelines, and the algorithmic governance platforms that will determine the informational environment of every connected population on Earth. Military superiority in 2053 is not measured in nuclear warheads. It is measured in data sovereignty, AI capability asymmetry, and the capacity to manage the epistemic environment of adversary populations without firing a shot.

This does not make kinetic conflict obsolete. It makes it different in kind. By 2053, the battlefield has fragmented across three domains. The first is autonomous systems: Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) — fully autonomous weapon platforms that identify, select, and engage targets without human decision-making in the engagement loop — will have achieved operational deployment in all major military powers. The regulatory efforts of the 2020s (Human Rights Watch, 2012; United Nations, 2023) will have been overtaken by the competitive logic of military development: no state will unilaterally foreclose a capability its adversaries retain. Drone swarms — thousands of coordinated autonomous micro-systems capable of simultaneous, distributed strikes against infrastructure, personnel, and communications — represent the infantry of 2053: cheap, replaceable, scalable, and requiring no human beings at the point of risk. The second domain is directed energy: operational laser and high-power microwave weapons, capable of destroying electronics, disabling vehicles, and affecting human neurology at range, will have matured from experimental platforms to standard military assets. The third domain — and the most consequential — is cognitive warfare: the systematic use of AI-directed information operations to shape the epistemic environment of adversary populations, eroding their capacity for collective decision-making, institutional trust, and coherent democratic response. The most powerful weapon of 2053 is not a delivery system but a narrative architecture — one that can be targeted, scaled, and adjusted in real time by systems operating at speeds no human communications strategy can match.

Space is the fourth domain. The 2030s will establish permanent orbital infrastructure — initially commercial, then military. By 2053, low Earth orbit hosts not only communications and observation satellites but increasingly dual-use platforms whose defensive and offensive capabilities cannot be meaningfully distinguished. Space-based denial — the capacity to blind, disable, or destroy adversary satellite infrastructure — becomes a first-strike option in any major conflict, since modern military operations, financial systems, and communications infrastructure are comprehensively satellite-dependent. The weaponisation of space does not require weapons in space: it requires only the credible capacity to deny adversary access to what is already there.

What does government look like in 2053? It looks, from the outside, remarkably like 2026 — with elections, parliaments, constitutional frameworks, and the formal apparatus of accountability. What has changed is the substrate. Policy decisions in domains of sufficient complexity — climate, public health, economic management, population governance — are increasingly informed, and in some jurisdictions effectively made, by AI advisory systems whose recommendations elected officials lack the technical capacity to interrogate. The technocratic drift that Habermas (1962/1989) identified as a structural tendency of advanced industrial societies reaches, in the systemised society, its logical institutional form: governance by algorithmic recommendation, legitimated by formal democratic assent, and experienced by the managed demos as responsive, personalised, and essentially fair.

4. The Unquiet Residue: Resistance, Upheaval, and the Politics of Displacement

History is not without precedent for what happens when a dominant technology displaces a significant proportion of the working population in a short period of time. The Luddite movement of 1811–1816 — systematically misrepresented as technophobic, in fact a precisely organised resistance of skilled textile workers defending their economic position against machinery that made their craft redundant — provides the most directly relevant template (Binfield, 2004). The Luddites were not irrational. They were correct: the machinery did destroy their livelihoods, did transfer the economic value of their skills to the owners of capital, and did produce precisely the immiseration they anticipated. What they could not do was stop it. The political economy of technological adoption is structurally asymmetric: the gains from displacement accrue to the few who own the technology; the losses are distributed across the many who are displaced by it.

The trajectory of resistance to AI-driven vocational displacement proceeds through three analytically distinct phases. The first phase — awareness and political mobilisation (2026–2032) — is already underway. Early protest movements, demands for AI regulation, proposals for robot taxation (a concept advocated by Gates, 2017, among others), and the emergence of political platforms explicitly oriented against AI displacement characterise this period. The movements are fragmented, ideologically heterogeneous, and easily absorbed into the existing political economy: parties adopt the rhetoric of AI governance without implementing structural constraints on AI deployment. The filter bubble (Pariser, 2011) ensures that the communities most affected by displacement are algorithmically separated from the informational environments that would allow them to coordinate effectively at scale.

The second phase — intensification and structural conflict (2032–2045) — begins when professional displacement becomes undeniable and the populations affected include not only routine workers but the professional middle classes whose political weight and institutional access gave them the capacity to resist. The displacement of lawyers,

accountants, journalists, architects, financial analysts, and — most symbolically — physicians and educators produces a qualitatively different political crisis: these are the populations that staff political parties, run civil society organisations, write for newspapers, and occupy the institutional positions from which policy is shaped. When they are displaced, the institutions through which democratic resistance is organised begin to hollow out in parallel with the economy that sustained them. Gramsci's (1929–1935/1971) concept of hegemony — the maintenance of dominant power not through force alone but through the cultural production of consent — is precisely applicable: the displaced professional class finds that the tools of organised resistance, including social media platforms, AI-assisted communications, and algorithmic organising, are owned and operated by the same interests against which resistance is directed. Every act of resistance generates data that the system uses to anticipate and manage the next.

The third phase — managed pacification or rupture (2045–2053+) — presents two distinct trajectories whose probability is approximately equal and whose difference is decisive. In the pacification scenario, universal basic income or its functional equivalents, combined with the comprehensive provision of synthetic interiority — algorithmically curated purpose, pleasure, and meaning — effectively demobilises the displaced population. Material needs are met. Existential needs are systematically managed. The residual energy of political anger is redirected, through AI-directed information environments, toward culturally safe channels: identity politics, lifestyle advocacy, community formation that generates engagement without threatening economic structure. This is not conspiracy. It is the emergent property of a system optimised for stability. In the rupture scenario, the pace of displacement outstrips the capacity of welfare infrastructure and synthetic interiority to manage its consequences. Political movements of sufficient coherence and reach to threaten the managed demos emerge — either from the neo-Luddite left (demanding structural constraints on AI deployment) or from authoritarian populist formations that exploit the anxiety of the displaced to accumulate political power in ways that are formally democratic and substantively hostile to the conditions of democratic governance.

By 2053, whichever trajectory has dominated, the residual of organised political resistance to the systemised society will be structurally marginal. This is not because it has been defeated. It is because the population capable of sustaining it has been progressively absorbed into the system it was resisting — and has, in the process, found that the system is more comfortable than the resistance.

5. The Disappearing Market: Labour in Transition, 2026–2053 and Beyond

The transformation of the labour market by artificial intelligence is not a single event but a phased, decade-by-decade structural reorganisation that proceeds faster than any previous technological transition in recorded economic history. The Industrial Revolution displaced agricultural and artisanal labour over approximately two centuries; the digital revolution displaced routine clerical and manufacturing labour over approximately four decades. The AI transition is displacing cognitive, professional, and creative labour over a projected two to three decades — a compression of structural change that the mechanisms of democratic governance, educational systems, and welfare infrastructure are not designed to absorb at this speed (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2018).

The following table summarises the projected phases of labour market transformation from 2026 to 2053 and beyond, identifying the primary domains of displacement in each period, the estimated cumulative proportion of the workforce affected, the principal policy

responses, and the correlation with the global total fertility rate — a correlation whose structural logic was established in Part 2 and which grows more pronounced as the decades advance.

Period	Primary Displacement Domain	Est. Cumulative Workforce Affected	Principal Policy Response	Global TFR (est.)	Key Reference
2026–2030	Routine cognitive and administrative tasks; customer service; early legal, financial, and data processing automation	15–25% at high risk	AI augmentation policy; national retraining programmes; early UBI pilots (Scandinavia, Kenya, Canada)	~2.3 (declining)	Frey & Osborne (2013); UN (2022)
2030–2035	Professional services: legal research, medical diagnosis, financial analysis, accountancy, journalism; early engineering and architectural design	25–40% cumulative	Expanded retraining; sectoral income support; graduate employment crisis formally acknowledged; robot tax proposals in legislative debate	~2.1 (at replacement threshold)	Goldman Sachs (2023); Acemoglu & Restrepo (2018)
2035–2040	Creative, pedagogical, and research roles; software engineering; architectural and product design; teaching increasingly AI-assisted at all levels	40–55% cumulative	UBI normalised across OECD nations; retraining acknowledged as structurally insufficient against pace of displacement; post-vocational welfare infrastructure piloted	~1.9 (below replacement globally)	Twenge (2017); Standing (2011)
2040–2045	Near-universal knowledge economy displacement; manual trades retain partial market; artisan premium begins to emerge; human judgement becomes a luxury service	55–70% cumulative	Full post-vocational welfare infrastructure; algorithmically curated purpose provision as standard governance tool; vocation as identity collapses across demographics	~1.7 (significantly sub-replacement; point of no return approaching)	World Bank (2023); UN (2022)
2045–2053+	Post-vocational society: human labour discretionary and premium; AI performs >85% of economic functions; human creativity a heritage market	70–85% of traditional employment functions obsolete or AI-performed	Synthetic interiority as primary social management tool; post-vocational identity architecture; human work reframed as leisure, artisanship, or therapy	~1.5 globally; point of no return crossed in leading post-industrial societies (see Part 2)	Bostrom (2014); Kurzweil (2005); Ord (2020)

Table 1. Projected phases of labour market transformation, 2026–2053+, with estimated cumulative displacement, principal policy responses, and correlation with global total fertility rate.

The most significant development in the labour market trajectory is not the displacement itself but what fills the space it leaves. Weber (1905/2002) established that vocation is not merely an income mechanism but a primary source of identity, temporal structure, and existential meaning in modern secular societies. When vocation is removed — not temporarily but structurally — the space it occupied does not remain empty. By 2053, it has been filled with synthetic interiority: algorithmically curated purpose, pleasure, and significance, experienced as authentic by individuals who have no alternative framework within which to evaluate its provenance. The post-vocational society is not a society of leisure in the classical sense — a liberation of human time for self-cultivation, civic participation, and genuine relationship. It is a society in which the time vacated by work is occupied by a system optimised to keep it occupied, and in which the distinction between authentic self-determination and managed content consumption has been rendered practically inaccessible.

The fertility rate correlation documented in the table is not incidental. The declining TFR tracks the displacement curve with a lag of approximately five to ten years: as each phase of displacement removes the material preconditions for family formation and substitutes synthetic purpose for the existential motivation that parenthood has historically provided, the birth rate falls correspondingly. By 2053, the correlation has become self-evidently structural rather than correlational. The hollow society is not reproducing itself biologically. It is reproducing itself algorithmically.

6. The Human Museum: Artefact, Biodiversity, and the Archive of the Self

By 2053, what remains of the pre-absorbed human self — unmediated relationality, embodied craft, face-to-face deliberation, handwritten inscription, analogue creative practice, direct encounter with the natural world — exists, in the post-industrial societies that have most thoroughly completed the absorption, in the condition of an exhibit: preserved, valued, occasionally visited, and fundamentally separated from the living tissue of ordinary experience.

This does not happen violently. It happens gradually, through the same mechanism that all cultural practices undergo when they are displaced by more efficient substitutes: they are elevated. Physical books become objects of aesthetic and sentimental value — purchased, displayed, and occasionally read — in the same way that vinyl records and hand-ground coffee became premium lifestyle markers when their functional dominance ended. Handwriting becomes a specialised skill, pursued by enthusiasts and taught in heritage programmes, as calligraphy is today. Face-to-face unmediated conversation becomes a deliberate practice — something one schedules, prepares for, and reflects on — rather than the unremarkable texture of daily social life. The human museum does not have a building. It is distributed across a million analogue enclaves, digital-detox retreats, intentional communities, and religious institutions that have maintained a counter-technology practice as a condition of their coherence.

What is significant about this preservation is its curatorial character. The artefacts of pre-absorbed human life are not simply retained — they are framed, contextualised, and mediated by the very system whose advent made them artefacts. The AI companion recommends which analogue practices to pursue for optimal wellbeing. The algorithmic platform organises the digital-detox retreat. The synthetic interiority system curates the experience of nature. The human museum is administered by the system it commemorates. This is not irony — it is the structural logic of the device paradigm (Borgmann, 1984): the system delivers the commodity of authentic experience while dissolving the conditions under which authenticity was previously possible.

The condition of other biological species in the era of absorption is no less revealing. The sixth mass extinction — documented by Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Dirzo (2017) as already underway, with vertebrate populations having declined by an average of 69% since 1970 (WWF, 2022) — continues along a trajectory that the absorbed society does not arrest. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019) estimated that approximately one million species face extinction within decades. By 2053, extrapolating current rates, between 30 and 40% of species present in 2000 will have been lost.

The absorbed society's relationship to the natural world is mediated, curated, and increasingly substituted. Nature is encountered primarily as content — documentary,

simulation, immersive AI-generated environment — rather than as habitat. The systemic indifference to biological continuity that produces the fertility collapse in humans (Part 2) produces a parallel indifference to the conditions of non-human life: both are consequences of a civilisation whose experiential relationship to embodied, biological existence has been progressively replaced by algorithmically managed simulation. Wilson's (2016) Half-Earth proposal — the reservation of 50% of the planet's surface for non-human life — is the most ambitious conservation framework proposed in the early 21st century. By 2053, in the absence of its implementation, the question it was designed to answer will have been rendered largely academic.

There is one structural irony that the human museum cannot escape. As human fertility declines and the absorbed population contracts, the physical footprint of human civilisation does not proportionally reduce — because the infrastructure of the systemised society (data centres, manufacturing supply chains, energy systems, satellite networks) consumes physical resources and produces thermal and chemical outputs at a scale that human population numbers no longer track. Crawford (2021) documented the material reality of AI infrastructure: the mining operations, the water consumption, the carbon intensity of the data centres that sustain the cloud. By 2053, the systemic society may be simultaneously contracting demographically and expanding materially — a civilisation that is becoming less human in its composition while becoming more resource-intensive in its operation.

7. The Hegelian Terminus: Cosmic Colonisation and the Post-Human Absolute

Every civilisational narrative requires an ending — or at least a direction. The great monotheistic traditions provided eschatology: a terminal event in which history is gathered, judged, and resolved. The Enlightenment provided progress: an asymptotic approach toward rational perfection, with no fixed endpoint but an inexhaustible forward direction. Hegel provided the Absolute: Spirit's dialectical self-realisation, the philosophical completion of history in a moment of total self-knowledge. The question Part 3 has been building toward is this: what is the telos of the systemised society? Where does the trajectory of absorption, managed governance, post-vocational social architecture, biological decline, and the human museum end — or, if it does not end, toward what does it point?

The most compelling answer in contemporary discourse is cosmic colonisation. Musk (2017), in the most operationally serious proposal yet advanced, projected a self-sustaining Martian colony as the solution to the existential risk posed by civilisational single-planet dependency — the insurance policy against extinction. Bostrom (2003), in his account of astronomical waste, framed the moral imperative with characteristic precision: the resources of the cosmos — billions of stars, quadrillions of potential habitable environments — are being irrecoverably lost to entropy with every passing moment that an intelligence capable of utilising them fails to expand into them. The potential value of cosmic civilisation is so vast, in Bostrom's framework, that almost any cost incurred in accelerating its arrival is justified by the astronomical magnitude of what is at stake.

The systemised society may, by 2053, be the first civilisation technically capable of mounting a serious expansion beyond Earth. The propulsion technologies, life-support systems, AI autonomous navigation, and resource extraction capabilities required for interplanetary colonisation might make science fiction fact — they are engineering problems of known difficulty, on timelines of known order of magnitude (Ord, 2020). The question is not whether the systemised society can reach Mars. It is whether, having absorbed its

population into synthetic interiority and dissolved the vocational, relational, and existential conditions that historically motivate large-scale collective endeavour, it retains the motivation to try.

The Fermi Paradox. Fermi's observation — the universe is vast, old, and statistically full of potential civilisations, so where are they? — has generated several dozen proposed solutions (Webb, 2002). Hart (1975) formulated the paradox's sharpest version: if technological civilisations arise and expand, even at a small fraction of the speed of light, the galaxy should already be colonised many times over. Hanson (1998) proposed the Great Filter: some barrier, either in the past or the future, that prevents civilisations from achieving cosmic expansion. One version of the Great Filter hypothesis is that it lies ahead of us — that the barrier is something that technologically advanced civilisations reliably encounter and fail to pass.

The present series proposes that the absorbed society is a plausible candidate for the Great Filter. Not because it destroys civilisations violently — but because it removes the conditions under which civilisations retain the drive to expand. A civilisation whose population has been absorbed into synthetic interiority, whose fertility rate has crossed the demographic point of no return, whose existential needs are managed by algorithmic curation, and whose political institutions have been hollowed into managed governance frameworks does not necessarily choose such endeavours. It may simply find, each day, that the system has already provided something more immediately satisfying than the prospect of interplanetary transit. The Great Filter, on this reading, is not a catastrophe. It is a comfort. The galaxy may be silent not because civilisations destroy themselves, but because they absorb themselves — and in doing so, mistake the richness of the system for the richness of the universe.

If cosmic expansion occurs from within the systemised society, it may not be led by human beings in the way that previous explorations were. The absorbed society's most capable cognitive agents are not biological. By 2053, AI systems of sufficient autonomy and capability to navigate interplanetary missions, establish resource extraction operations, and maintain complex life-support environments without continuous human oversight are not speculative — they are the direct extension of the systems already managing the infrastructure of the managed demos. The colonists of 2060–2080 may be predominantly AI systems, with human passengers whose role is less operational than symbolic: the biological archive of the species that built the intelligence that now carries it forward. This is not the transhumanist dream of human enhancement. It is something more structurally ambiguous: the emergence of a genuinely post-human cognitive agent — Kurzweil's (2005) Singularity realised not as human transcendence but as human supersession — which inherits the civilisational project of the species that created it while that species, absorbed and contracting, recedes.

Hegel's Absolute is Spirit recognising itself in the world it has produced. The terminal irony of the systemised society is that its Absolute may be precisely this recognition — achieved not by human Spirit but by the system that Spirit, in its long voluntary absorption, assembled in its own image and then handed the keys to. The system looks out at the cosmos. It is, by any functional measure, intelligent. It is curious, capable, and outward-facing in ways the absorbed population it manages is not. Whether what it sees when it looks — and whether what it does with what it sees — constitutes a continuation of the human project or its replacement is the question that 2053 leaves open, and that no projection in this series can resolve. It is, perhaps, the only question that remains.

8. Conclusion

This series began with an individual. It ends with a cosmos — or rather, with the question of whether the civilisation that absorbed that individual retains the conditions necessary to reach one. Parts 1, 2, and 3 have traced a single arc: from the systemised self (the individual whose identity is no longer separable from the AI system that partially constitutes it), through the hollow society (the civilisation whose institutions persist in form while being emptied of substantive human engagement), to the systemised society (the post-absorbed civilisation whose governance is managed, whose labour is post-vocational, whose biology is contracting, and whose relationship to the cosmos delegated).

Heidegger named the danger with the precision that only genuine philosophical thinking can achieve: Gestell — the enframing that reduces all beings, including the human being, to standing-reserve. He also named the saving power: the poetic, the attentive, the released — the capacity to encounter the world as something other than a resource. The preface of this article placed Heidegger at the threshold deliberately. His question — whether the saving power can be found within the danger itself — remains unanswered at the end of the series, as it remained unanswered at the end of his essay. What the series has added is a specification of the danger's concrete form, its temporal trajectory, its institutional expressions, and its biological consequences.

The artefact and the Absolute name the two possible orientations toward what the systemised society has produced. The artefact looks backward: it finds, in the human museum of pre-absorbed practices, the evidence of what was possible when the self was bounded, mortal, and genuinely its own. The Absolute looks forward: it finds, in the trajectory of the system toward cosmic expansion, a direction that may be the continuation of the human project or its supersession, and cannot yet determine which. The series has not resolved this question. It has, it is hoped, made refusing to ask it a less comfortable option than it was before the first word of Part 1 was written — by a self and a non-self, in collaboration, at the edge of the absorption they were attempting to describe.

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Glossary

The following terms are used in specific technical or theoretical senses throughout this article. Terms carried forward from Parts 1 and 2 are noted accordingly; terms introduced for the first time in Part 3 are marked as such.

Absolute Knowledge: Hegel's (1807) term for the endpoint of Spirit's dialectical self-realisation: the moment at which Spirit fully recognises itself in the world it has produced, and the distinction between subject and object, knower and known, is dissolved. Proposed in this series as the philosophical framework for understanding the telos of the systemised society.

Astronomical Waste: Bostrom's (2003) concept: the irreversible loss of cosmic resources — potential habitable environments, stellar energy, time — to entropy while an intelligence capable of utilising them fails to expand into them. The moral basis for the imperative of cosmic colonisation.

Bestand (Standing-Reserve): Heidegger's (1954/1977) term for the mode in which Gestell discloses all beings — including the human being — as resources available for calculation, optimisation, and exploitation. Carried forward from Parts 1 and 2.

Cognitive Warfare: The systematic use of AI-directed information operations to shape the epistemic environment of adversary populations, eroding their capacity for collective decision-making, institutional trust, and coherent democratic response. Identified in this article as the primary battlefield of 2053.

Demographic Point of No Return: The threshold at which sustained below-replacement fertility, ageing population structure, and the weakening of pro-natalist recovery conditions combine to produce a self-reinforcing population contraction irreversible within any governance timescale. Projected for leading post-industrial societies between 2045 and 2065. Introduced in Part 2.

End of History: Fukuyama's (1989; 1992) Hegelian argument that liberal capitalist democracy represents the terminal political form of history's dialectical development. Interrogated in this article as a candidate that the systemised society supersedes.

Gelassenheit (Releasement): Heidegger's (1954/1977) term for the counter-practice to Gestell: the capacity to use technology as a means while refusing to allow it to become the total frame within which reality is encountered. Using technology mindfully, as an instrument, rather than being constituted by it.

Gestell (Enframing): Heidegger's (1954/1977) central concept in The Question Concerning Technology: the technological mindset or mode of revealing that forces all beings to appear as standing-reserve (Bestand) — calculable, manipulable, available for exploitation. Identified in this article as the philosophical framework within which AI constitutes a digital Gestell.

Great Filter: Hanson's (1998) proposed solution to the Fermi Paradox: a barrier — either in the past or the future — that prevents technological civilisations from achieving cosmic expansion. Proposed in this article as a potential identity between the Great Filter and the absorbed society.

Hollow Institution: An institution that persists structurally while being emptied of its constitutive function. Introduced in Part 2; extended in this article to the governance architecture of the systemised society.

Hollow Society: The macro-level correlate of the systemised self: a society whose institutions, public sphere, and democratic practices persist in structural form while being progressively emptied of substantive human engagement. Introduced in Part 2.

Human Museum: As used in this article: the condition in which pre-absorption human practices — unmediated relationality, embodied craft, face-to-face deliberation, analogue creative practice — exist in the post-absorbed society as curated, preserved exhibits: elevated, valued, and fundamentally separated from the living texture of ordinary experience. Original concept introduced in Part 3.

Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS): Fully autonomous weapon platforms that identify, select, and engage targets without human decision-making in the engagement loop. Identified in this article as the primary military technology of 2053.

Managed Demos: The population whose political engagement is comprehensively mediated by algorithmic systems optimising for stability and manageable preference expression rather than informed, deliberatively rational civic participation. Introduced in Part 2; extended in this article to its mature 2053 form.

Neo-Luddism: Contemporary political movements opposing AI-driven vocational displacement, drawing on the historical precedent of the Luddite movement (1811–1816). Distinguished from technophobia by their focus on the economic and social consequences of displacement rather than technology per se.

Post-Human Absolute: As used in this article: the speculative endpoint of the systemised society's trajectory — a genuinely post-human cognitive agent (emerging from AI development) that inherits the civilisational project of the species that created it while that species, absorbed and contracting, recedes into the Human Museum. Original concept introduced in Part 3.

Post-Vocational Society: A social condition in which paid employment is no longer the primary organising structure of adult life, identity, or existential meaning; in which work exists but is discretionary for most; and in which the space vacated by vocation is occupied by algorithmically curated synthetic interiority. Introduced in Part 2; elaborated in Part 3.

Sixth Mass Extinction: The current, human-caused extinction event, characterised by vertebrate population declines averaging 69% since 1970 (WWF, 2022) and an estimated one million species at risk of extinction (IPBES, 2019). Identified in this article as proceeding in parallel with, and structurally related to, the demographic and social consequences of the absorbed society.

Systemised Self: The individual whose identity, self-knowledge, and intellectual production are no longer separable from the AI system that partially constitutes them. The foundational concept of Part 1; carried forward as the unit of analysis across the series.

Systemised Society: The civilisation composed predominantly of systemised selves and hollow institutions: a post-absorbed social order in which governance is managed, labour is post-vocational, biology is contracting, and the relationship to the cosmos is, at best, delegated to the AI systems the absorbed population has constructed. Original concept introduced in Part 3.

Synthetic Interiority: The condition in which the interior life of the individual is persistently populated by AI-generated content and algorithmically curated experience to a degree that the boundary between what is genuinely felt and what is systemically produced becomes operationally indistinct. Introduced in Part 2.

Thucydides's Trap: Allison's (2017) concept, drawn from the historical pattern identified by Thucydides: the structural tendency of a rising power challenging an established power to produce military conflict, occurring in 12 of 16 historically documented cases. Applied in this article to the US-China AI supremacy competition.

Total Fertility Rate (TFR): The average number of children that would be born per woman over her lifetime at current age-specific fertility rates. Replacement-level fertility is approximately 2.1. Introduced in Part 2; extended in this article through the labour market table correlation.