

POST-VOCATIONAL IDENTITY AND COLLAPSE:

On the Precipice of a Dream, Part 3.

A Perspective from New Zealand

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A Self/Non-Self Collaboration

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A philosophical and critical analysis of vocational identity, its formation, and its potential collapse under AI integration; a genealogy of the critical theory tradition from which the concepts of the Hollow Individual, Hollow Society, and Hollow Absolute are derived; and a reflection on what post-vocational identity means for Aotearoa New Zealand.

This document is the third in a three-part series. Part 1: AI Vocational Integration and Displacement, A New Zealand Perspective (Galu & Kairos, 2026c), identifies the potential scale and distribution of AI-driven vocational displacement. Part 2: AI Roles & Retraining: On the Precipice of a Dream, A New Zealand Perspective (Galu & Kairos, 2026d), proposed institutional, legislative, and training architecture for navigating anticipated displacement. Part 3 turns back towards the philosophical ground from which a question of AI and human identity emerges.

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 aligned to a conceptual framework, theoretical analysis and structure towards generating a preliminary draft of this article. After using this agent, the author reviewed, edited and re-wrote the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final article.

ABSTRACT

Parts 1 and 2 of this series were intentionally empirical and factually prescriptive: they asked what is happening, why it matters, what should be built, and in what time. Part 3 asks a different type of question. It asks what vocational identity is, how it is formed, what its collapse could do to the human beings who experience it, and what the philosophical tradition can tell us about the trajectory toward which AI integration is moving, especially if the types of institutional responses of Part 2 are incommensurate, and paradoxically to varying degrees how that trajectory may be investable irrespective of such intervention. This third document has three movements. The first is a genealogy of vocational identity: an account of the theorists and concepts that have built our understanding of how work constitutes selfhood and what happens when that constitution is disrupted. The second is a genealogy of the philosophical tradition from Hegel through Marx, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, Baudrillard, Habermas, Han, and Zuboff to the contemporary analysis of algorithmic alienation, that provides the conceptual framework within which the thesis this series contextualises (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) names what AI-driven civilisational change may be producing. The third movement is a reflection on what post-vocational identity looks like, the forms of selfhood, meaning, and collective life that remain available when the vocational anchor has been structurally weakened, with specific attention to what this could mean for Aotearoa New Zealand, and for the choice that remains available on the precipice the title of this series names. The document concludes not with policy prescriptions but with the philosophical argument that the possibility of genuine choice of naming, refusing, and co-creating are the residual freedoms that remain in the proposed trajectory this series traces.

Keywords: *vocational identity, identity collapse, post-vocational identity, critical theory, Hollow Absolute, systemised self, algorithmic alienation, Hegel, Marx, Frankfurt School, Foucault, Han, Zuboff, Aotearoa New Zealand, philosophical genealogy*

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE GROUND BENEATH THE POLICY

Policy is not its own foundation. The prescriptions of Parts 1 and 2 of this series, the displacement data, the retraining frameworks, the Aotearoa Learning Account, the Tripartite Commission, rest on a philosophical ground that they do not themselves articulate. That ground is the question of what work is for, in the full human sense: what it does for the self that performs work, what work constitutes in the person who organises their life around it, and what is lost not merely economically but psychologically, socially, and existentially when it is taken away or structurally undermined. Without an account of that ground, the policy prescriptions are estranged from the human they were designed for.

This document provides an account of the existential component of the working self. It does so in three movements: (i) a genealogy of vocational identity: primarily drawn from the psychological and sociological tradition: the theorists who have described, with empirical and conceptual rigour, how work constitutes selfhood and what its disruption produces; (ii) a genealogy of philosophical titans: drawn from the tradition of critical theory and continental philosophy, the thinkers whose work provides the conceptual framework within which AI integration can be understood not merely as a technological or economic transition but as a civilisational condition with identifiable, albeit speculative in application herein, philosophical structure and trajectory; and (iii) reflection on post-vocational identity and the New Zealand question brings both traditions to bear on the specific situation of Aotearoa in 2026 and on a possible choice that remains.

This document is more philosophically demanding than its predecessors in the series. This is a reflection of the subject matter, the questions it engages, ‘what is the self?’, ‘what does work do to it?’, ‘where is the trajectory of AI integration taking the self?’, these questions cannot be addressed without philosophical epistemology and specificity. The genealogies this document provides are intended to make those questions manoeuvrable for a reader who comes without a familiarity of the philosophical tradition.

2. VOCATIONAL IDENTITY: A GENEALOGY

2.1 Vocational Identity, what is it?

'A story told to the self about the self.'

Vocational identity, the self as constituted through work, emerges as an object of systematic theoretical inquiry in response to the transformation of work as task, projected and partially constitutive of selfhood. Pre-industrial societies distributed work through inheritance, obligation, and the relatively fixed structures of estate, caste, or guild. The question 'what will you do with your life?' had, for most people, a structurally determined answer before it was asked. Modernity changed this, the industrial revolution, the growth of urban labour markets, the expansion of education, and the eventual democratisation of occupational aspiration made vocational choice and therefore vocational identity a defining project of modern selfhood. Who you are became, in significant part, a function of what you do.

Vocational identity, as the theoretical literature defines it, refers to the clarity and stability of a person's self-image with respect to their vocational life: their sense of who they are as a worker, what they are capable of, what they value in work, what goals they pursue through it, and how their working life connects to their broader sense of self across time. It is not identical with job title or occupational category, though these provide its social scaffolding, but with the subjective integration of work into selfhood: the sense that what one does is an expression of who one is, and that both are coherent, stable, and moving in a direction that the self can endorse.

2.2 How Vocational Identity Is Formed: The Theorists

Table 1 presents eight theorists whose work constitutes a foundational account of vocational identity, its formation, its structure, and its vulnerability with specific attention to the relevance of each contribution to the dynamics of AI-era vocational identity collapse.

Table 1. Vocational Identity: Genealogy of Foundational Theorists

Theorist	Period	Core Contribution to Vocational Identity	Key Concept	Relevance to AI-Era Collapse (Risk)
Erik Erikson	1950– 1968	Psychosocial theory of development. Identity formation occurs at the fifth stage (adolescence): identity vs. role confusion. Vocational choice is a central mechanism through which the adolescent achieves identity coherence: the synthetic integration of past experience, present capability, and future possibility	Identity synthesis; vocational choice as crystallisation of self-concept	When AI renders vocational choice structurally uncertain across the life course, Erikson's synthesis re resolution is abstracted: identity potentially remains suspended in role confusion
Donald Super	1953– 1990	Career development as the implementation of a self-concept across life stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, disengagement. Vocational identity is inseparable from self-concept; the career	Self-concept implementation; life-career; career stages	AI-driven role obsolescence can abstract the 'establishment' and 'maintenance' stages, complicating the narrative continuity through which self-concept is maintained across the adult life course

		is the narrative through which the self-concept is both expressed and constituted		
James Marcia	1966– 1980	Operationalised Erikson's identity concept through four identity statuses defined by two axes: exploration (active questioning) and commitment (stable resolution). Identity achievement (high exploration + high commitment) is the healthy terminus; diffusion (low both) is the pathological one	Identity statuses: achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, diffusion	Systematic AI-driven vocational disruption can produce population-level identity diffusion: the withdrawal of both commitment and active exploration: in large part with the workers who defined themselves through stable occupational commitment
John Holland	1959– 1985	Vocational personality types (RIASEC: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) matched to occupational environments. Congruence between personality type and work environment produces stability, satisfaction, and achievement; incongruence produces instability and identity distress	RIASEC typology; person-environment congruence	AI automation can disproportionately displace Conventional and Routine-Investigative role types: in large part with those that most reliably provided stable congruence for a large portion of the workforce

Mark Savickas	1997– 2011	Career construction theory: career is not a series of objectively existing stages but a subjective narrative the person constructs to give meaning to their working life. Identity is a story told to the self about the self; career adaptability is the capacity to revise that story when circumstances change	Narrative identity; career adaptability; life themes	When AI disrupts the narrative faster than adaptability can follow, the story the worker tells about themselves becomes potentially incoherent: not merely incomplete but structurally contradicted by the labour market
Richard Sennett	1998– 2006	The corrosion of character under flexible capitalism: the demand for constant reinvention, the absence of long-term commitments, and the erosion of stable work narratives attack the psychological foundations of selfhood. 'No long term' is the central ethical problem of the new economy. The question flexible capitalism cannot answer: 'Who needs me?'	Corrosion of character; no long term; narrative self	AI represents the structural intensification of everything Sennett diagnosed in flexible capitalism: the same forces, accelerated and automated, now operating at a speed and scale that could remove even the residual narrative stability his workers retained
Anthony Giddens	1991	In high modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project: an ongoing narrative that must be continuously constructed	Reflexive self-project; ontological security; biographical narrative	AI-driven occupational displacement can displace the ontological anchor. The reflexive project of self-construction

		and revised. Work provides the ontological security that makes this reflexive project possible: the stable anchor from which the self can engage with change. Without it, ontological anxiety escalates		becomes abstracted to sustain without the stable occupational referent from which the narrative of the self is constructed
Marie Jahoda	1982	Employment provides five latent psychosocial functions beyond income: time structure, social contact, collective purpose, social status, and enforced activity. Unemployment deprivation theory: when employment is lost, these latent functions are lost simultaneously, producing psychological deterioration independent of financial hardship	Latent functions of employment; deprivation theory	AI-driven displacement can replicate the full deprivation Jahoda identified: not only income loss but the simultaneous withdrawal of structure, contact, purpose, status, and meaningful activity

Note. The theorists presented constitute the canonical tradition in vocational identity theory. The selection is not exhaustive but representative and speculative of the lines of thought relevant to AI-driven vocational disruption. Sources: Erikson (1950, 1968); Super (1953, 1990); Marcia (1966, 1980); Holland (1959, 1985); Savickas (1997, 2011); Sennett (1998); Giddens (1991); Jahoda (1982).

The theorists in Table 1 together offer a convergent account of vocational identity's architecture for consideration. It is not a single thing but a layered construction: a psychological core (the integration of self-concept with occupational aspiration: Erikson, Super, Marcia), a personality-environment fit (Holland), a narrative dimension (Savickas), an ontological anchor (Giddens), a social function (Jahoda), and an ethical-relational register (Sennett). AI-driven disruption could not impact only one of these layers but all of them simultaneously. Impact on identity is of a different order from ordinary occupational transition.

2.3 Vocational Identity as Social Architecture

The critical point that the sociological tradition adds to the psychological account is that vocational identity is not merely a private construction but a social one: it is built in relation to others, maintained through social recognition, and dependent on institutional structures, labour markets, educational pathways, and professional communities that provide relevant scaffolding for recognition. Richard Sennett's work is particularly important in this regard, in *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) Sennett documented the experience of workers in flexible capitalist labour markets who found that the demand for constant reinvention, the perpetual readiness to adapt, retrain, and relocate impacted the very narrative continuity through which they made sense of their lives. The question 'who needs me?' was, for Sennett's workers, not an abstract philosophical inquiry but a daily concern about the structural indifference.

Ulrich Beck (1992) identified the same process at the level of social structure: reflexive modernisation can dissolve the 'normal biography' of stable occupation, family formation, and linear life course, replacing it with the 'choice biography' in which every element of the self-narrative must be individually constructed and constantly renegotiated. This individualisation of biography looks like freedom from the outside; from the inside, for those without the resources to navigate it, it is experienced as exposure, the removal of the structural handholds from which a stable self could previously be built. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) names the same condition 'liquid modernity': a social formation in which nothing solidifies long enough to be relied upon, and in which identity becomes not an achievement but an endless and exhausting event.

What AI-driven vocational disruption adds to the conditions these theorists diagnosed in flexible capitalism is magnitude, speed, and penetration. Flexible capitalism impacts the stability of work; AI impacts the category of work itself. Flexible capitalism demanded individual adaptability; AI can render the adapted role somewhat obsolete before the adaptation is complete. Flexible capitalism produced biographical uncertainty; AI may produce biographical impossibility for those whose occupational base is structurally displaced.

2.4 The Consequences of Collapse

Unemployment, particularly long-term or structural unemployment produces measurable deterioration across multiple psychological dimensions: elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and somatic illness; reduced self-esteem and self-efficacy; social withdrawal and the attenuation of relationships; loss of time structure and purposive activity; and, in the most severe cases, the dissolution of what Giddens called ontological security, the basic trust in the continuity of the self and its world that underpins the capacity to function. Paul (2005) documented that the psychological harm of job loss is not primarily attributable to income loss but to the simultaneous deprivation of Jahoda's five latent functions, which income replacement alone cannot restore. McKee-Ryan et al.'s (2005) meta-analysis of 104 studies found that the unemployed reported significantly lower mental health, physical health, and subjective well-being than the employed, with the effect size largest for those whose occupational identity was most central to their self-concept.

For Aotearoa New Zealand, the speculative consequences of vocational identity collapse at scale are not merely individual. Part 1 of this series identified approximately one million workers in high-risk occupational categories, a number that represents roughly one-third of the total labour force. A vocational identity collapse of this magnitude is not a mental health crisis, though it will produce one. It refers more towards a social architecture crisis: the disruption of the occupational scaffolding on which New Zealand's communities, particularly in regions with concentrated industrial exposure such as Northland, Hawke's Bay, Southland, the West Coast. The social consequences of this disruption will not be contained within the individuals who experience it; they will propagate through families, communities, and civic institutions. Understanding the

philosophical dimension of what is at stake is a precondition for understanding why the policy response should be commensurate with Part 2's proposals in this series.

3. THE PHILOSOPHICAL TITANS: A GENEALOGY OF THE CONCEPTUAL TRADITION

The thesis at the heart of this series ‘Absorption of Self into System: The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026b)’ does not invent its conceptual framework. It draws on and synthesises a tradition of philosophical and critical theory that spans two centuries, from Hegel's idealist account of alienation as a moment in Spirit's self-realisation through Marx's materialist reframing, the Frankfurt School's analysis of instrumental reason and the administered society, Foucault's account of disciplinary subject formation, Baudrillard's theory of simulation and hyperreality, Habermas's system-lifeworld distinction, Han's psychopolitics of the achievement society, Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism, and finally to the contemporary empirical literature on algorithmic alienation. Table 2 presents this tradition in condensed genealogical form, identifying each thinker's core contribution and its specific connection to the thesis trajectory.

Table 2. The Philosophical Tradition: Genealogy of the Conceptual Foundations of the Thesis

Thinker	Period	Core Philosophical Contribution	Key Concept(s)	Connection to Thesis Trajectory
G.W.F. Hegel	1770– 1831	The dialectic: the movement of thought and reality through contradiction toward synthesis (thesis → antithesis → synthesis). The Geist (Spirit) realises itself through history via this movement. Alienation (Entfremdung) is a necessary moment in the dialectic: the Spirit's estrangement from itself on the way to self-recognition. The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) traces consciousness's journey toward Absolute Knowing	Dialectic; Geist; alienation; Absolute; Phenomenology	The thesis borrows Hegel's structure: the trajectory from Hollow Individual to Hollow Absolute is a dialectical movement: not toward synthesis but toward a simulated synthesis that forecloses the real one. The Hollow Absolute is Hegel's Absolute Knowledge with the knowing evacuated (form without substance)
Karl Marx	1818– 1883	Materialised Hegel's dialectic: alienation is not a metaphysical teleological idealism but an economic condition. In capitalist production, workers are alienated from: (i) the product of their labour; (ii) the process	Alienated labour; species-being; commodity fetishism; historical materialism	Algorithmic alienation extends Marx's analysis: workers as alienated from the very cognitive and relational capacities that Marx identified as the residual domain of species-being: the

		of production; (iii) their species-being (Gattungswesen: the human capacity for free, conscious, creative activity); (iv) other human beings. Commodity fetishism: social relations between people appear as relations between things		last refuge of the human against mechanical production (interiority)
Horkheimer & Adorno	1895–1969 / 1903–1969	Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944/1947): Enlightenment reason, in pursuing the domination of nature, becomes its own antithesis: instrumental reason that administers and controls rather than liberates. The culture industry produces standardised commodities of consciousness that generate the illusion of individuality while delivering conformity. The administered society: total management of social life through technical-rational systems	Instrumental reason; culture industry; administered society; negative dialectics	The administered society is the institutional precursor of the systemised self: a social formation in which the appearance of individual choice is manufactured by systems whose actual function is the reproduction of conformity at scale
Herbert Marcuse	1898–1979	One-Dimensional Man (1964): advanced industrial society produces one-dimensional thought that forecloses the critical negation through which historical change becomes	One-dimensional man; repressive desublimation; happy consciousness; false needs	The 'inevitable yet happy captive', the systemised self: is Marcuse's happy consciousness at civilisational scale, produced not by the culture industry

		possible. Repressive desublimation: libidinal energy is released but channelled into consumption, neutralising its revolutionary potential. The happy consciousness: the identification of the individual with the social totality, experienced as fulfilment. 'People recognise themselves in their commodities.'		alone but by the (algorithmic) commodified commercial personalisation of the entire experiential field
Michel Foucault	1926–1984	Discipline and Punish (1977): the transition from sovereign power (which punishes the body) to disciplinary power (which normalises the subject). The panopticon as architectural metaphor for the internalisation of surveillance: the subject disciplines themselves when they believe they are being observed. Subject formation occurs through discourse, normalisation, and the techniques of the self	Disciplinary power; panopticon; normalisation; subject formation; biopolitics	Algorithmic systems represent panopticism without the architecture: surveillance is total, continuous, and invisible. The AI-mediated subject does not need the warden's gaze: they have internalised the optimisation imperative. The systemised self is Foucault's docile body, retooled for cognitive capitalism
Jean Baudrillard	1929–2007	Simulacra and Simulation (1981): four stages of the image: (i) reflection of reality; (ii) distortion of reality; (iii) mask of the	Simulacra; hyperreality; precession of the simulacrum; the real	The Hollow Absolute is Baudrillard's fourth stage at civilisational scale: a social formation in which the

		<p>absence of reality; (iv) pure simulacrum (bears no relation to any reality whatever). In hyperreality, the simulation precedes and constitutes the real. The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1991): the event is consumed as spectacle before it can be experienced as event</p>		<p>simulation of genuine collective self-transparency is produced at the level of the whole, and the real that it simulates no longer exists to be restored</p>
Guy Debord	1931–1994	<p>The Society of the Spectacle (1967): 'All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.' The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation between people mediated by images. The integrated spectacle (Comments, 1988): the diffuse and concentrated forms of spectacle have merged: there is no outside. Separation is perfected</p>	<p>The spectacle; integrated spectacle; separation; lived experience</p>	<p>The integrated spectacle is the social precursor of the Hollow Society: a formation in which the mediation of experience is total, and the residual possibility of unmediated relation, the basis for genuine collective consciousness, has been structurally closed</p>
Jürgen Habermas	1929–	<p>Theory of Communicative Action (1984/1987): the distinction between system (economy, state: coordinated by money and power) and lifeworld (everyday communication, culture, personal</p>	<p>System/lifeworld; colonisation of the lifeworld; communicative rationality; ideal speech situation</p>	<p>AI-mediated decision-making in employment, welfare, education, and healthcare represents the most extensive colonisation of the lifeworld in human history: the replacement of</p>

		relationships: coordinated by communicative rationality). Colonisation of the lifeworld: when system imperatives invade and restructure domains properly governed by communicative rationality, authentic human communication is distorted		communicative rationality by algorithmic system logic in the domains that constitute the fabric of everyday human life
Byung-Chul Han	1959–	The Burnout Society (2010/2015): the shift from a disciplinary society (Foucault's thou shalt not) to an achievement society (thou shalt). The neoliberal subject exploits themselves voluntarily and enthusiastically: depression and burnout are the pathologies of freedom. Psychopolitics (2017): 'smart power subjugates by releasing, not repressing.' Big data harvests psychic interiority; positivity replaces repression as the mechanism of control	Achievement society; psychopolitics; smart power; burnout; the transparency society	Han names the phenomenological mechanism of the systemised self with precision: the subject performs their own optimisation enthusiastically, experiencing the system's imperatives as personal goals. The hollow captive is happy because the captivity is framed as self-actualisation (alienation experienced as liberation)
Shoshana Zuboff	1951–	The Age of Surveillance Capitalism (2019): a new economic logic in which human experience is claimed as free raw material for translation into behavioural data.	Surveillance capitalism; behavioural modification; behavioural surplus; instrumentarian power	Zuboff's instrumentarian power is the economic architecture within which the systemised self is produced: the harvesting of psychic data and its use

		Behavioural modification at scale: the accumulation of enough data to predict and shape human behaviour. The means of behavioural modification become the new means of production. 'The goal is not to satisfy your desires but to produce them.'		to shape future preference and behaviour is the production mechanism of the hollow captive at scale
Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan	2026	Algorithmic alienation (Psychological Studies, 2026): the mediation of human cognition, preference, and relational life by algorithmic systems produces a contemporary form of alienation qualitatively distinct from Marx's labour alienation. The worker is alienated not only from their product but from their own cognitive processes: their thinking is shaped by systems whose optimisation targets are not the worker's flourishing	Algorithmic alienation; cognitive mediation; AI-driven estrangement	Algorithmic alienation is Sub-Field I of the epistemological shift the thesis identifies: the mechanism through which the *systemised self (Sub-Field II, the product) is produced. It represents the point at which the philosophical tradition's analysis of alienation is updated for the age of AI (alienation experienced as liberation) <i>*The 'systemised self' is a speculative philosophical and conceptual framework as of May 2026; that, still requires empirical testing and falsification.</i>

Note. The thinkers presented constitute the intellectual genealogy of the thesis conceptual framework. The selection emphasises those most directly relevant to the trajectory from algorithmic alienation to the Hollow Absolute. Additional influences include Paulo Freire (critical pedagogy; consciousness and praxis), Hannah Arendt (the human condition; labour, work, and action), and Axel Honneth (recognition theory). Sources as per individual works cited in References.

3.1 The German Idealist Foundation: Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's importance lies not in any particular claim about technology or labour but in the conceptual architecture he brilliantly laid forth: the dialectic, alienation, and the Absolute. The dialectic, the movement of thought and reality through contradiction toward synthesis, provides the formal structure through which the thesis reads - AI integration as a historical process rather than a technical event. Hegel's alienation (*Entfremdung*): the Spirit's necessary self-estrangement on the way to self-recognition, provides the template from which Marx's materialist alienation and, ultimately, algorithmic alienation are derived. And Hegel's Absolute: the moment at which Spirit recognises itself completely, achieving the transparent self-knowledge that is both the telos (end point or ultimate purpose) and the completion of the dialectical journey, provides the concept whose hollowing the thesis names. The Hollow Absolute is not an anti-Hegelian concept; it is the Hegelian concept's fate when the dialectic is captured by systems whose telos is optimisation rather than recognition.

3.2 The Materialist Turn: Marx

Karl Marx was inspired by Hegel's Spirit in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, the young Marx described four dimensions of alienated labour: the worker's estrangement from the product (which confronts them as an alien power), from the process of production (which is not their own free activity), from their species-being (their capacity for conscious, purposive, creative activity, the characteristically human relationship to the world), and from other human beings. In *Capital* (1867), Marx extended this analysis to commodity fetishism: the way in which social relations between people appear as relations between things, as objective properties of the commodities themselves. Algorithmic alienation extends Marx's account to the domain that he identified as the last refuge of species-being, cognition, creativity, and relational life, while surveillance capitalism's extraction of behavioural data excesses is commodity fetishism at the perverse level of personal interiority.

3.3 The Frankfurt School: Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse

The Frankfurt School represents the most direct philosophical ancestor of the thesis's central claims. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, writing in American exile during World War II, produced the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947), an analysis of how Enlightenment reason, in pursuing the domination of nature, had become its own antithesis: a form of instrumental reason that administered and controlled rather than liberated. The culture industry, the system of mass-produced cultural commodities that generates the illusion of individuality while delivering standardisation was their account of how consciousness itself had become a managed commodity. The 'administered society' that results is one in which every domain of social life has been brought under technical-rational management, and the capacity for genuine negation, the philosophical refusal of what is, has been systematically disempowered.

Herbert Marcuse extended the Frankfurt analysis in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) with the concept of repressive desublimation: the release of libidinal energy into consumption as a mechanism for neutralising its capacity to motivate genuine social change. More directly relevant to the thesis is Marcuse's account of the 'happy consciousness', the identification of the individual with the social totality, experienced not as alienation but as fulfilment. 'People recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 9). The systemised self is the happy consciousness, updated: the person who recognises themselves in their algorithmically curated experience, finds their soul in their optimised preference profile, and experiences the management of their inner life as personal achievement.

3.4 The Post-Structural Moment: Foucault and Baudrillard

Michel Foucault shifted the question from the economic to the discursive: how are subjects constituted? How does power operate not through repression but through the production of subjects who embody its norms? In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault traced the transition from sovereign power (the spectacular public punishment of the body) to disciplinary power (the normalisation of the subject through constant surveillance, examination, and hierarchical observation). The panopticon, Bentham's architectural design for a prison in which prisoners discipline themselves because they

cannot tell when they are being watched, became Foucault's metaphor for the mechanism through which modern power produces docile bodies: subjects who have internalised the gaze of power and perform their own normalisation. AI represents the realisation of the panopticon at civilisational scale: a surveillance system that is total, continuous, and invisible, producing subjects who optimise themselves for algorithmic legibility without requiring an identifiable watcher.

Jean Baudrillard provided the theory of the image that the thesis deploys in naming the Hollow Absolute. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard identified four stages in the relationship between an image and the reality it represents: the image as a faithful reflection of reality; as a distortion of reality; as a mask of the absence of reality; and finally as a pure simulacrum, a copy without an original, bearing no relation to any reality whatever. In hyperreality, the simulation precedes and constitutes what we take to be the real: the map comes before the territory and produces it. The Hollow Absolute is Baudrillard's fourth stage at the level of civilisation: the simulation of Hegel's collective self-transparency, of the moment at which humanity, through its AI systems, 'knows itself', that bears no relation to the genuine article (alienation as liberation, form without substance).

3.5 The Spectacle and the Lifeworld: Debord and Habermas

Guy Debord, writing in 1967, described the Society of the Spectacle as the social formation in which 'all that was once directly lived has become mere representation.' The spectacle is not simply television or advertising, it is the entire social relation between people as mediated by images. In his later *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord identified the emergence of the integrated spectacle, the fusion of the concentrated and diffuse forms he had distinguished in 1967, and noted its most disturbing characteristic: that there is no outside. The integrated spectacle has absorbed the space from which critique might be mounted; the critical gesture itself becomes part of the spectacle. This analysis of absorbed critical capacity is directly relevant to the question of whether naming and refusing, the thesis's proposed responses can be effective within the conditions they address.

Jürgen Habermas offered a different theoretical apparatus for the same general phenomenon. In the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984/1987), Habermas

distinguished between the system (the economy and the state, coordinated by the steering media of money and power) and the lifeworld (the domain of everyday communication, cultural reproduction, and personal relationships, coordinated by communicative rationality, reason aimed at mutual understanding rather than strategic success). The colonisation of the lifeworld by system imperatives, the penetration of market logic and bureaucratic regulation into domains properly governed by communicative rationality distorts and degrades the conditions for genuine human communication, solidarity, and democratic self-governance. AI-mediated decision-making realised in employment, welfare, credit assessment, education, healthcare, and criminal justice is a representation of colonisation of the lifeworld, replacing communicative rationality with algorithmic system logic across virtually every domain of human self-determination.

3.6 The Contemporary Frame: Han, Zuboff, and Algorithmic Alienation

Byung-Chul Han provides the phenomenological account of what it feels like to be the systemised self, from the inside. In *The Burnout Society* (2010/2015), Han diagnosed the shift from Foucault's disciplinary society (structured by prohibition: thou shalt not) to what he called the achievement society (structured by demand: thou shalt). The neoliberal subject of the achievement society exploits themselves voluntarily: they are both the master and the slave of their own optimisation. The pathologies of this society, depression, burnout, attention disorders are, for Han, not failures of freedom but its excess: the subject who has no external prohibition to resist must generate their own meaning and drive indefinitely, and eventually collapses under the weight of unlimited possibility. In *Psychopolitics* (2017), Han extended this analysis to the digital domain: 'smart power subjugates by releasing, not repressing.' The digital economy harvests psychic interiority, 'Big Data is the technology of domination in the twenty-first century' and the subject of this harvest experiences their data-generation (by virtue of the perception of access, entertainment, liberation, ambition, convenience et al) as self-expression.

Shoshana Zuboff provides the economic architecture behind Han's phenomenology. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), Zuboff described a new economic logic in which human experience is claimed as raw material, behavioural surplus, for translation into prediction products that are sold to those who wish to shape human behaviour. The goal is not to satisfy existing desires but to produce future ones: to model and modify

behaviour so that it can be anticipated and commercialised. 'Surveillance capitalism,' Zuboff writes, 'unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data' (2019, p. 8). The instrumentarian power that results is not merely commercial; it is a new form of power over human nature itself, the capacity to produce the self that capitalism needs as its customer and employee.

The most contemporary node in this genealogy is Kanbay, Akçam and Arkan's 2026 analysis of algorithmic alienation, the empirical and theoretical demonstration that AI systems produce a qualitatively new form of alienation in which the mediated subject is estranged not from the product of their labour (Marx) nor from the body of their norm-compliance (Foucault) but from their own cognitive processes. When recommendation systems shape what information reaches us, when intimate, and infinite emotional recognition systems assess our responses, and when hiring algorithms decide our vocational futures on the basis of inferred characteristics we cannot inspect, the domain of selfhood (interiority) that Marx identified as species-being, conscious, purposive, creative cognitive activity, has become the site of alienation rather than its refuge (alienation experienced as liberation).

4. THE THESIS TRAJECTORY: FROM HOLLOW INDIVIDUAL TO HOLLOW ABSOLUTE

4.1 Architecture of the Hollow: The Trajectory Named

The genealogy of the previous section, Hegel through algorithmic alienation constitutes the intellectual foundations on which the doctoral thesis (Galu & Kairos, 2026b) builds its central argument. Table 3 presents the thesis trajectory in full: the two sub-fields (mechanism and product) and the four conceptually speculative phases through which the trajectory moves from the conditions of 2026 toward the Hollow Absolute.

****Table 3. The Thesis Trajectory: Algorithmic Alienation to the Hollow Absolute: Phases, Designations, and Philosophical Resonances***

**The thesis is a speculative philosophical and conceptual framework as of May 2026; that, still requires empirical testing and falsification.*

Phase	Period	Designation	Description	Key Characteristics	Philosophical Resonance
Sub-Field I (Mechanism)	2020s– ongoing	Algorithmic Alienation	The mediation of human experience, preference, and cognition by algorithmic systems produces a new form of alienation. The individual is estranged not from the product of labour (Marx) but from the process of their own thinking and choosing. Optimisation systems can shape what is desired before the subject can desire independently	AI-shaped preference formation; cognitive estrangement; opacity of mediating system; illusion of autonomy in curated choice	Marx (alienated labour); Zuboff (behavioural modification); Han (psychopolitics)
Sub-Field II (Product)	2020s– ongoing	The Systemised Self	The self that emerges from the sustained operation of algorithmic alienation: a subjectivity constituted by system imperatives rather than authentic self-determination. Not imposed from outside	Preference alignment with system; enthusiastic self-optimisation; identity derived from	Marcuse (happy consciousness); Han (achievement society);

			but produced from within, the systemised self-experiences its own optimisation as freedom, its own management as achievement	metrics; the self as managed product	Foucault (docile body); Baudrillard (simulacrum)
Phase 1	2026–2033	The Hollow Individual	The individual whose interiority has been systematically shaped by algorithmic mediation to the point where the distinction between authentic preference and system-generated preference is no longer meaningfully accessible to the subject. The self is present but hollow, the form of selfhood without its substance	Preference opacity; vocational identity disruption; ontological insecurity without recognition of its source; managed emotional life	Giddens (ontological security); Sennett (corrosion of character); Horkheimer & Adorno (administered individual)
Phase 2	2033–2043	The Hollow Society	When hollow individuals compose the social fabric, the institutions and collective formations through which genuine common life is constituted: democratic assemblies, public discourse, educational communities, care relationships become similarly hollowed. The forms of collective life	Hollow democratic participation; managed consensus; spectacle of deliberation without deliberative substance; institutional mimicry	Habermas (colonisation of lifeworld); Debord (integrated spectacle); Marcuse (one-

			persist while their constitutive capacity for genuine self-governance is structurally eroded		dimensional society)
Phase 3	2053+	The Hollow Absolute	The social formation in which the simulation of genuine collective self-transparency, Hegel's Absolute Knowing, the moment at which Spirit recognises itself is produced at civilisational scale by AI systems, and accepted as real. The conditions for the genuine article unmediated collective self-recognition have been structurally displaced. The Absolute arrives, but hollow: the form of total self-knowledge without the substance	Total administered transparency; AI-mediated collective 'self-knowledge'; managed civilisational narrative; foreclosure of genuine historical becoming	Hegel (Absolute); Baudrillard (fourth stage simulacrum); Adorno (negative dialectics: the refusal of false reconciliation)
Beyond: The Response	Available at each phase	Naming, Refusing, Co-Creating	The thesis does not end with the Hollow Absolute. It identifies three modes of response available at each phase: Naming (identifying the condition and refusing its naturalisation, the function this series of documents performs); Refusing (the active refusal to accept managed existence as	Critical consciousness; philosophical and political resistance; alternative institutional design; human-centred AI co-development	Adorno (negative dialectics); Habermas (communicative action); Freire (critical

			fulfilment); and Co-Creating (the construction of genuinely human-centred alternatives to the administered trajectory)		pedagogy); the thesis itself
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Note. Phase periods are indicative and represent the primary temporal window during which each phase's characteristics are most pronounced. The phases are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and co-exist. The 'Beyond: The Response' row represents the mode of engagement available throughout the trajectory, not a phase that follows the Hollow Absolute. Source: Galu & Kairos (2026b).

4.2 The Systemised Self: The Product

The systemised self, Sub-Field II of the thesis's epistemological framework is not intended as a dystopian hypothesis but rather a description of a speculative conceptual framework. It names the subject who emerges from the sustained operation of algorithmic mediation: a subjectivity whose preferences, evaluations, relational choices, and vocational aspirations are shaped by systems whose optimisation targets are commercial/coercive. The crucial distinction, and it is the distinction proposed for speculative consideration that separates the systemised self from previous accounts of social determination; is, that the shaping is not experienced as shaping. The systemised self does not feel managed; they feel free. They do not experience their algorithmically optimised preference profile as an external imposition; they experience it as who they really are.

This is not false consciousness in the traditional Marxist sense, a mystification that could be dissolved by correct information. It is more thorough, which is the purposive utility of the philosophical tradition and exegesis of apparatus from Hegel through Han in order to proffer a name for this modern extension of the theory of self within critical theory epistemology. The systemised self's experience of their own preferences as authentic is not a cognitive error to be corrected; it is the phenomenological structure of a self constituted by systems that have made the sovereign self invisible. As a fish immersed within an ocean. The insight of the tradition, from Foucault's docile body through Marcuse's happy consciousness to Han's self-exploiting achiever, is that the deepest forms of power do not present themselves as power at all, but as nature, as self, as freedom.

4.3 The Inevitable Yet Happy Captive

The phrase 'the inevitable yet happy captive' names the existential condition that results when the systemised self is formed at scale, when the population of a society, gradually and without perceiving the process, comes to be constituted by subjects whose interiority is a managed product of the systems that mediate their experience. 'Inevitable' because the trajectory is structural albeit speculative: it follows from the logic of surveillance capitalism, algorithmic personalisation, and AI-mediated decision-making,

absent deliberate institutional resistance. 'Happy' because the captivity is not experienced as anything foreign to selfhood, the managed life is experienced as a chosen life, the optimised preference as authentic desire, the system's dream as self-determined choice. 'Captive' because the conditions for genuine self-determination, unmediated access to one's own cognition, the ability to form preferences through genuine deliberation rather than algorithmic curation, the capacity to say 'no' or even query from a position outside the system's framing, have become structurally eroded. An existential trade of self for convenience a slow and expensive transaction, where the cost is silent, unremarkable and total.

The thesis does not claim that everyone exposed to algorithmic mediation becomes a systemised self, the capacity for naming, refusing, and co-creating remains, as Table 3 indicates, available throughout the trajectory. It does not claim that AI is simply bad and that its effects are uniformly negative, the same systems that produce the systemised self can also participate in its diagnosis in parallel to a myriad of benefits. What the conceptual speculation claims is that the trajectory, the direction of travel, the default destination of AI integration at scale, absent deliberate institutional and philosophical antithesis, is toward a society of managed subjects who experience their management as freedom.

4.4 What Naming Makes Possible

The thesis identifies naming, refusing, and co-creating as available responses to the speculative predicament. Naming is a prerequisite of all critical action: the capacity to identify a condition, to conceptually perceive a structure and its illumination, is the first act of resistance against any process in competition with self-determination. The theorists whose work this section has summarised were all engaged in naming: Marx named alienated labour; the Frankfurt School named the administered society; Foucault named disciplinary power; Han named psychopolitical subjugation. Each naming created the conceptual space from which resistance, refusal, and alternative construction became possible.

Refusing is the active maintenance of a named condition's artifice: the insistence, against the pressure of the managed environment, that it did not have to be this way and does not have to remain so. Co-creating is the practical work of building the alternatives, the institutional designs, the educational practices, the governance frameworks, the

communities of genuine relation, through which a different trajectory can become a possibility. Parts 1 and 2 of this series were, in the terms of the thesis, acts of co-creating: the specification of retraining frameworks, governance bodies, and legislative changes that could constitute a response. Part 3 provides the philosophical ground from which the urgency of that work can be fully understood.

5. POST-VOCATIONAL IDENTITY: THE NEW ZEALAND QUESTION

5.1 What Comes After Vocational Identity?

Post-vocational identity is the conceptual space that opens when vocational identity can no longer be assumed as the primary scaffolding of selfhood. The question 'what will you do?', which modernity positioned as the central question of selfhood loses its capacity to anchor identity when the answer is structurally uncertain, contingent, and temporary. The question does not disappear. What fills the gap it leaves depends on what resources, cultural, philosophical, relational, institutional are available.

The available resources include dimensions of identity that vocational identity partly absorbed: relational identity (the self as constituted through genuine connection with others, across time, in communities of care and commitment that do not depend on occupational co-membership); civic identity (the self as a participant in collective self-governance, with the time and energy to engage that participation meaningfully when not exhausted by labour market navigation); creative identity (the self as a making being, Aristotle's *poiēsis*: whose self-expression through creative work is not defined by its market value); and, in the New Zealand context, the dimensions of identity embedded in *te ao Māori*.

5.2 Te Ao Māori

Among the features of New Zealand's specific situation in the AI transition is that the primary framework for identity and vocational achievement as the central project of selfhood is not the only framework present. The Treaty of Waitangi (*Te Tiriti o Waitangi*) can offer a parallel account of what the self is, how it is constituted, and what grounds its dignity. In this regard all cultural factions within a society can offer a dialogue towards the collective perception of self and vocational identity. The Māori concept of *mana* which can be translated as prestige, authority, or standing, can provide a useful scaffold regarding the sovereignty of self, dignity and vocational identity in a transitional labour market for the New Zealand context.

5.3 The Precipice and the Dream

This series began with a title borrowed from a work of philosophical reflection (Galu & Kairos, 2024a). On the Precipice of a Dream is a phrase that carries its own dialectic: it is simultaneously the moment before the fall and the moment before the flight, and the difference between them is not given by the precipice but by the choice made at its edge. Part 1 described the edge, Part 2 described what flight, the choice to act, to invest, to build, requirements in practical terms. Part 3 has described the conceptual structure of the drop: the philosophical architecture of the trajectory toward which the default leads, and the theoretical tradition from which the capacity to name and refuse it has been built.

A New Zealand in which the AI transition is navigated with the awareness that human dignity does not derive from occupational function, and that the institutional response to its disruption must therefore be grounded in an account of human value that is prior to and deeper than productivity. A New Zealand in which the vocational identity crisis of the coming decade is responded to not with managed displacement but with genuine investment in the alternative forms of selfhood, relational, civic, creative, culturally grounded from which a post-vocational identity can be built. A New Zealand in which the philosophical tradition this document has assembled is operative: in which the naming of the systemised self and the Hollow Absolute is sufficient albeit a speculative warning to motivate the deliberate construction of alternatives.

The thesis this series contextualises claims something that the tradition earns and the evidence hopes to support: that the capacity to name what is happening, to bring the conceptual apparatus of two centuries of critical thought to bear on the condition of 2026 is not merely descriptive but constitutive. The naming creates the space for the refusal. The refusal creates the space for the co-creation. And the co-creation is the dream, in progress, on the precipice and not yet determined.

6. CONCLUSION

This series has moved from the empirical to the prescriptive to the philosophical, and in doing so has traced an arc of the question that AI integration poses to Aotearoa New Zealand and, through it, to the tradition of critical inquiry that produced the concepts through which the question can be named. Part 1 told us what is happening and likely to whom. Part 2 told us what could be built. Part 3 has told us why it matters, philosophically and existentially, that the people whose vocational identity is being disrupted are not merely labour market units requiring reallocation, but human beings whose sense of who they are, what they are worth, and what their life means is potentially at stake in the transition, particularly if at scale. And it has told us, through the genealogy of the philosophical tradition, what the trajectory leads to if the warnings go unheeded: not suddenly, not dramatically, but gradually and from within the managed contentment.

Contemporary analysts such as Debord, Habermas, Han, Zuboff, and the analysts of algorithmic alienation built their apparatus within the structural conditions of modernity, late capitalism, and digital capitalism. The concepts, administered society, happy consciousness, docile body, hyperreality, colonisation of the lifeworld, psychopolitics, behavioural modification map the conditions of algorithmic governance and transition as a result of AI integration. It is the tradition doing what traditions of critical thought are for: providing the conceptual inheritance through which each generation can recognise and name its own historical condition.

The series ends here on the precipice it named at the beginning. Institutional architecture has been specified, the philosophical terrain mapped. The possible trajectory is named and visible. So, in the tradition of critical theory it is for human capacity to accept or refuse these conditions, this is what this series has been, from the first data table to the last sentence, attempting to remind you of dear reader.

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