

A HISTORY OF HEGEL, SPIRIT AND THE ABSOLUTE

A Dialectical Apex of Critical Theory for the AI Era

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A Self/Non-Self Collaboration

2026

This article traces a philosophical genealogy from Hegel's unified system of Spirit, Dialectic, and the Absolute through the development of critical theory to the contemporary emergence of algorithmic alienation and the systemised self, proposed as an initiating vocabulary and framework available for naming, understanding, and responding to the AI era.

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides background, history and theory pertaining to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), the purpose of which is to provide context for readers to the previous works assembled by the authors; specifically, the Absorption of Self into System series and The Systemised Self doctoral thesis. GWF Hegel arguably built one of the most ambitious and influential philosophical systems of the previous 200 years, a unified account of reality as the self-developing self-knowledge of Spirit (Geist), advancing through dialectical contradiction toward the Absolute. That system, and the tradition of critical thought it generated provides a comprehensive conceptual apparatus available for identifying the structural conditions under which human freedom can be realised, distorted, or foreclosed. This article traces the arc of that concept from its origins in Hegel's synthesis of Greek, early-modern, and Enlightenment philosophy, into his own unified framework of Dialectic, Spirit, and the Absolute, then its utility in the hands of Marx, the Frankfurt School, Foucault, Baudrillard, Habermas, Han, and Zuboff, and finally to its contemporary application in the analysis of algorithmic alienation and the systemised self as proposed in the doctoral thesis Absorption of Self into System: The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026). The article concludes with a brief essay that draws on John B. Calhoun's Universe 25 experiments (1968–1973) to construct a speculative essay and thought experiment about the structural dynamics of civilisational behavioural collapse under conditions of hyper-saturation and purpose deprivation, and applies Calhoun's conclusions to the human experience of AI-era integration build on top of 25 years of social media at scale. The central argument is that the trajectory from algorithmic alienation through the systemised self to the Hollow Absolute, represents a contemporary formation within the critical theory tradition for the AI era: the total administration of the subject, the foreclosure of genuine negation, and the production of a contentment that is structurally indistinguishable from captivity (alienation experienced as liberation). The response the tradition offers, and the thesis enacts, is: naming, refusing, and co-creating as instruments of reclamation.

Keywords: *Hegel, Geist, the Absolute, dialectic, critical theory, alienation, Frankfurt School, algorithmic alienation, systemised self, Hollow Absolute, Universe 25, behavioural sink, AI era, philosophy of spirit*

1. HEGEL: LIFE, WORLD, AND PHILOSOPHICAL FORMATION

1.1 Biographical Overview

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born on 27 August 1770 in Stuttgart, in the Duchy of Württemberg. His father, Georg Ludwig Hegel, was a civil servant; his mother, Maria Magdalena Louisa née Fromm, died of a fever when Hegel was eleven years old. The young Hegel excelled in classical history, and in 1788 entered the Tübinger Stift, Protestant theological seminary at Tübingen, where he shared lodgings with the poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. The three of them would achieve literary renown, also they shared an enthusiasm for the French Revolution in 1789.

Hegel completed his theological and philosophical studies in 1793 and worked as a private tutor, the years to 1800 produced no publications but laid the conceptual groundwork. In 1801, Hegel moved to Jena in Germany where Hegel produced his first published work *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy* (1801), and co-edited with Schelling the *Critical Journal of Philosophy*, establishing his voice in the post-Kantian debate about the nature of the Absolute.

Hegels time in Jena culminated in his most celebrated work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807). Hegel wrote the final sections of this work as Napoleon's army approached Jena in October 1806. Hegel wrote to a friend that he had seen Napoleon 'the World-Soul on horseback', riding through the city on the eve of battle. Hegel then moved to Bamberg, where he worked as a newspaper editor (1807–1808), and then to Nuremberg, where he served as headmaster of the Gymnasium (1808–1816), married Marie von Tucher in 1811, and composed the three volumes of the *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, 1812–1816). In 1818, Hegel accepted a prestigious philosophy chair at the University of Berlin and he remained there until his death from cholera on 14 November 1831 at the age of sixty-one. His Berlin years were his most publicly influential, his work *The Philosophy of Right* (1820) established his political philosophy.

1.2 World Events During His Lifetime

The French Revolution (1789) was a defining event of Hegel's intellectual formation, nineteen when the Bastille fell, the Revolution's trajectory provided a complex account of freedom and liberty. The Reign of Terror (1793–1794) to follow taught Hegel that abstract freedom, unchecked by the concrete institutions of ethical life, produces not liberation but violence. This drove Hegel's central political argument in the *Philosophy of Right*. Napoleon, for Hegel represented the World-Spirit personified, the embodiment of the Enlightenment principles that the Revolution had declared but that only the institutional order Napoleon imposed could secure. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (1815) and the conservative Restoration that followed represented the counterpoint, with traditional monarchs taking back control of Europe.

The German intellectual setting of Hegel's lifetime, the intertwined currents of Romanticism, classical humanism, and idealist philosophy was his contemporary context. The Romantic movement's celebration of feeling, intuition, and organic unity over Enlightenment reason and mechanical analysis was a position Hegel engaged with deeply, absorbing its critique of the arid formalism of Kantian morality while insisting on the systematic rigour that Romanticism lacked. The early stirrings of industrial capitalism, already transforming England and beginning to reshape the European continent, provided the background for Hegel's analysis of civil society in the *Philosophy of Right*, including a structural account of the poverty that market society produces as its necessary by-product, which predated Marx's analysis by several decades.

1.3 The Intellectual Inheritance

Hegel described himself as having inherited the full tradition of Western philosophy and having comprehended it, understood as the progressive self-development of Spirit's self-knowledge. His intellectual genealogy consisting of each major thinker he engaged represents a stage in the tradition's movement toward the conceptual comprehension that Hegel utilised and synthesised. Table 1 presents a representation of this genealogy.

Table 1. A Representation of Hegel's Intellectual Genealogy: Predecessors, Core Contributions, and Hegel's Transformations

Thinker	Period	Core Contribution	Hegel's Specific Debt	How Hegel Utilised / Transformed	Key Works Hegel Drew On
Plato	428–348 BCE	Dialectic as the movement of thought toward truth; the Forms as the rational structure underlying appearance; the Form of the Good as the apex of intelligibility; philosophy as the soul's ascent from opinion to knowledge	The conviction that reality has an intelligible rational structure; the dialectical method as the engine of philosophical inquiry; the aspiration toward a unified comprehension of the whole	Hegel dynamised Plato's static Forms into a living developmental process. The Platonic ascent toward the Good becomes the dialectical movement of Spirit toward Absolute Knowing. The Forms are not a separate realm but the rational structure of the process itself	Republic; Parmenides; Philebus; Sophist
Aristotle	384–322 BCE	Teleology: all things move toward their telos (end/purpose); Nous (divine intellect) as self-thinking thought; actuality over potentiality; the syllogism as the structure of reasoning	The teleological structure of development toward a rational end; the notion of a self-thinking mind at the apex of reality; the priority of actuality over mere possibility	Spirit's movement toward self-knowledge is structurally Aristotelian: it is a purposive development toward a determinate end (Absolute Knowing). The Absolute as self-thinking thought is Hegel's	Metaphysics; De Anima; Nicomachean Ethics; Politics

				Christianised and historicised Aristotelian Nous	
Spinoza	1632–1677	Substance monism (Nature as the single infinite substance); all finite things are modes of the one substance; freedom as the understanding of necessity	The monist insight that there is ultimately one reality, not a dualism of mind and matter; the idea that freedom consists in comprehending, rather than escaping, necessity	Hegel accepted the monism but rejected its static character: 'Spinozism is the true beginning of all philosophy' but the Absolute must be understood as Subject (active, self-developing) not merely as Substance (passive totality). The dialectic is Spinoza's Absolute set in motion	Ethics (Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata); Tractatus Theologico-Politicus
Immanuel Kant	1724–1804	Transcendental idealism: the categories of the understanding (Verstand) structure experience; the thing-in-itself (Ding an sich) is unknowable; freedom as moral autonomy (self-legislation); the three Critiques as the architecture of a philosophy of mind	The centrality of the subject in constituting experience (phenomena); the ambition of a systematic philosophy; the idea of freedom as self-determination; the regulative role of reason (Vernunft)	Hegel's most decisive transformation: he rejected the unknowable thing-in-itself ('an empty abstraction') and the hard division between concept and reality. For Hegel, the rational is the real and the real is the rational. The Kantian subject becomes the universal Subject, Spirit. The categories are not fixed	Critique of Pure Reason; Critique of Practical Reason; Critique of Judgement

				impositions but moments in Spirit's self-development	
Fichte	1762–1814	Subjective idealism: the self-positing I (das Ich) as the unconditioned foundation of all reality; the I posits the Not-I (the external world) as its own other; freedom as the I's self-realisation through overcoming the Not-I	The dialectical structure of self-positing and its relation to its own negation; the idea that subjectivity constitutes its object through a process of self-externalisation and return	Hegel used Fichte's I/Not-I structure and universalised it: the self-positing I becomes Spirit, which externalises itself in Nature and history and returns to itself through human consciousness. But Hegel criticised Fichte's account as too subjective: Spirit is not merely 'I' but the universal rational structure of reality	Wissenschaftslehre (Science of Knowledge); Addresses to the German Nation
Schelling	1775–1854	Absolute idealism: the Absolute as the identity of subject and object, prior to their differentiation; nature as unconscious Spirit (Naturphilosophie); art as the highest organ of philosophy, reconciling the infinite and the finite	The concept of the Absolute as the identity of subject and object; the idea that nature is not alien to mind but its unconscious expression; the aspiration toward a totalising philosophy of the Absolute	Hegel's famous critique: Schelling's Absolute is 'the night in which all cows are black': an undifferentiated unity that cancels rather than comprehends difference. Hegel insisted the Absolute must be understood as a differentiated, self-developing	System of Transcendental Idealism; Philosophy of Nature; Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom

				<p>process: as Subject, not merely as identity. The Phenomenology is explicitly a departure from Schelling</p>	
Rousseau	1712–1778	<p>The General Will (volonté générale) as the expression of genuine collective freedom; the social contract as the basis of legitimate political authority; the critique of civilisation as corrupting natural goodness; freedom as participation in collective self-legislation</p>	<p>The idea that genuine freedom is not arbitrary individual preference but self-determination through participation in a rational community; the distinction between the will of all and the general will</p>	<p>Hegel's concept of Sittlichkeit (ethical life): the realisation of freedom in the concrete institutions of family, civil society, and state: is a systematic development of Rousseau's General Will, trimmed of its romanticism about natural goodness and grounded in institutional history</p>	<p>The Social Contract; Discourse on the Origin of Inequality; Emile</p>
Herder	1744–1803	<p>Historicism: culture, language, and thought are historically and communally constituted; the Volksgeist (spirit of a people) as the animating principle of each historical community; the idea of a plurality</p>	<p>The historicist insight that Spirit is always embedded in a particular cultural and historical context; the concept of Volksgeist as a precursor to Hegel's account of how Spirit</p>	<p>Hegel took Herder's historicism and universalised it within a developmental framework: the particular Volksgeister of history are not equal and incommensurable</p>	<p>Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humanity; This Too a Philosophy of History</p>

		of historical cultures each with its own validity	particularises itself in specific historical peoples	(as in Herder) but are successive moments in the self-development of the universal Weltgeist (World-Spirit) toward Absolute freedom	
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Note. The eight thinkers selected provide a representation of Hegel's philosophical antecedents. The genealogy is not exhaustive. Sources: Pinkard (2000); Beiser (2005); Taylor (1975).

2. HEGEL'S UNIFIED PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Dialectic (Dialektik)

The dialectic is the engine of Hegel's system, the structure through which thought and reality develop. Its most widely cited formulation of thesis, antithesis, synthesis was not Hegel's own vocabulary; these terms were introduced by Fichte and applied to Hegel's system by others subsequently. Hegel's own language is more precise: the movement proceeds through the Immediate (das Unmittelbare), Negation (Negation or Vermittlung: mediation), and the Negation of the Negation (die Aufhebung — sublation). The crucial term is *Aufhebung*, which carries in German a productive triple meaning unavailable in English translation: *aufheben* means simultaneously to cancel, to preserve, and to lift to a higher level. When Spirit advances dialectically, it does not simply discard what it negates, it preserves what was true in the negated moment while transforming and elevating it into a richer form. The dialectic is therefore a structural description of progressive development: consciousness, social institutions and historical epochs contain within a contradiction that drives itself toward a more adequate expression.

Table 3 represents the dialectical movement, tracing its operation across the catalogues of Hegel's system.

Table 2. Hegel's Core Philosophical Concepts with German Originals

German Term	English	Definition	Stage in Framework
Geist	Spirit/Mind	The self-developing totality of rational reality; simultaneously individual mind, collective social life, and the Absolute. The dynamic rational structure of the whole	All stages: the subject of the entire system
Das Absolute	The Absolute	The whole of reality comprehended in its complete self-development; the truth of all partial, finite forms. 'The True is the Whole' (das Wahre ist das Ganze)	Culmination: Absolute Geist

Dialektik	Dialectic	The logical structure of development through contradiction: the immediate is negated, the negation is itself negated (Aufhebung), producing a richer unity that preserves what was true in both moments	Structural method throughout the system
Aufhebung	Sublation	Hegel's pivotal term: to cancel, to preserve, and to lift to a higher level: simultaneously. When Spirit moves dialectically, it does not merely negate what came before; it preserves its truth in a higher form	Every dialectical transition
Begriff	Concept/Notion	The highest form of thought; reason grasping reality in its full self-determined development. Not a mental representation but the dynamic self-developing structure of reality itself. The Science of Logic is the science of the Begriff	Logic: the third stage (after Being and Essence)
Entfremdung	Alienation	Spirit's necessary self-estrangement from itself on the path to self-recognition. Consciousness must become other to itself: must externalise itself in the world: in order to recognise itself in that other and achieve full self-knowledge	Central to Phenomenology and Philosophy of History
Sittlichkeit	Ethical Life	The concrete, communal realisation of freedom in the living institutions of family, civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft), and the state. Distinguished from abstract Moralität (individual moral consciousness)	Objective Geist: Philosophy of Right
Weltgeist	World-Spirit	Spirit as it realises itself through the succession of world-historical peoples and events. Each great historical epoch is the determinate expression of the World-Spirit at a particular stage of its self-development	Objective Geist: Philosophy of History

Das absolute Wissen	Absolute Knowing	The culminating moment of the Phenomenology of Spirit: the point at which consciousness recognises that the entire journey of its development: through all its shapes and contradictions: is the self-knowing of Spirit. The end of the phenomenological journey	Absolute Geist: terminus of Phenomenology
Phänomenologie	Phenomenology	The study of the forms (shapes, Gestalten) of consciousness as they develop through their internal contradictions toward Absolute Knowing. The 'highway of despair' through which consciousness discovers that each of its certainties is inadequate	Subjective → Absolute Geist: 1807 work
Volksgeist	Spirit of a People	The particular historical-cultural expression of Spirit in a given historical community: its laws, customs, art, religion, and philosophy, understood as the organic expression of a single spiritual principle	Objective Geist: world historical peoples

Note. German terms are given in their forms as used in Hegel's published works. English translations follow the standard scholarly conventions of Miller (Phenomenology), Di Giovanni (Science of Logic), and Nisbet (Philosophy of Right and Lectures). Sources: Hegel (1807/1977, 1812/2010, 1817/2010, 1820/1991).

Table 3. The Hegelian Dialectic: Structure and Movement

Moment	German Term	Logical Stage	Phenomenological Stage
1. The Immediate (Thesis)	Das Unmittelbare/These	Being (Sein)	Sense- Certainty/Consciousness
↓ Internal Contradiction → Negation			
2. The Mediated (Antithesis)	Die Negation/Antithese	Essence (Wesen)	Self- Consciousness/Recognition
↓ Negation of the Negation → Aufhebung			

3. The Concrete Unity (Synthesis)	Die Aufhebung/Synthese	Concept (Begriff)	Reason/Spirit/Absolute Knowing
∩ The synthesis becomes the new immediate, the dialectic continues at a higher level			

Note. The three-column structure represents the parallel operation of the dialectic across the logical (Science of Logic), phenomenological (Phenomenology of Spirit), and historical (Philosophy of History) registers of Hegel's system. The stages are not temporally sequential but logically necessary. Source: Hegel (1807/1977, 1812/2010).

2.2 Spirit (Geist)

Geist is simultaneously the most important and misunderstood term in Hegel's philosophy. It designates the self-developing totality of rational reality, the dynamic structure through which mind and world, subject and object, the individual and the universal, are progressively recognised as expressions of a single rational process. Hegel distinguishes three moments or forms of Geist. Subjective Geist (subjektiver Geist) designates the individual mind in its psychological and phenomenological development, in the forms of consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason as they unfold within the individual subject. Objective Geist (objektiver Geist) designates the collective expressions of mind in social and political life, law (Recht), morality (Moralität), and above all ethical life (Sittlichkeit): the concrete institutions of family, civil society, and the state through which freedom is realised in the world. Absolute Geist (absoluter Geist) designates the highest forms of Spirit's self-expression: art, in which the infinite is given sensuous form; religion, in which Spirit is represented in the mode of feeling and devotional imagery; and philosophy, in which Spirit comprehends itself through the medium of the pure concept (Begriff) and thereby achieves, in Hegel's account, the complete and adequate form of its own self-knowledge.

2.3 The Absolute (das Absolute)

'The True is the Whole' (das Wahre ist das Ganze), this sentence from the Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit encapsulates Hegel's account of the Absolute. The Absolute is not a fixed entity that pre-exists the world and subsequently creates it; it is the whole process of Spirit's self-development, comprehended in its completed form. It is not reached by

abstracting from the finite particulars of the world but by comprehending those particulars as necessary moments in the self-realisation of the rational whole. The Absolute is not behind or beyond the phenomena of history, consciousness, and social life; it is what those phenomena are, when their full development and interconnection is properly grasped. Philosophy, as the conceptual comprehension of the whole, is for Hegel the actual realisation of Absolute Geist, not merely a description of it but its most adequate form of existence. In the famous formulation of the Philosophy of Right: 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk', philosophy comprehends a form of life only as it is concluding, when its development is complete enough to be grasped. This claim about the retrospective character of philosophical comprehension has deep implications for the thesis this article contextualises: naming the Hollow Absolute only when the trajectory that leads to it is sufficiently advanced to be visible.

2.4 The Major Works

Table 4 presents Hegel's major published and posthumous works in their chronological and intellectual sequence.

Table 4. Hegel's Major Works: Chronology, Period, Key Themes, and Conceptual Innovation

Period	Year	Work	Key Themes	Conceptual Innovation
Jena	1801	The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy	Critique of Fichte's subjectivism; endorsement of Schelling's Absolute Identity	First published articulation of Hegel's departure from Fichte and proximity to Schelling
Jena	1807	Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geistes)	The journey of consciousness through its shapes toward Absolute Knowing; alienation; master-slave dialectic; ethical life; religion; Absolute Spirit	The master-slave dialectic; the concept of Aufhebung in action; the first systematic account of Spirit's self-development through consciousness

Nuremberg	1812– 1816	Science of Logic (Wissenschaft der Logik)	The a priori structure of rational reality: Being, Essence, Concept; the logic of the Absolute	Logic as the self-movement of pure thought; the demonstration that the categories of thought are the categories of reality
Heidelberg	1817	Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften)	The complete Hegelian system in compressed form: Logic, Philosophy of Nature, Philosophy of Spirit	The first complete systematic statement of the three-part system: Logic → Nature → Spirit
Berlin	1820	Elements of the Philosophy of Right (Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts)	Abstract right, morality, ethical life (family, civil society, state); world history	The systematic derivation of the rational state; the analysis of civil society and structural poverty; 'What is rational is actual'
Berlin (Lectures)	1822– 1831	Lectures on the Philosophy of History; Aesthetics; Philosophy of Religion; History of Philosophy (all posthumous)	World history as Spirit's self-realisation; art as Absolute Spirit; religion; the history of philosophy as Spirit's self-knowledge	The concrete application of the system to historical actuality; the account of world-historical peoples; the end of art thesis

Note. The posthumous lectures (Philosophy of History, Aesthetics, Philosophy of Religion, History of Philosophy) were published from student transcripts after Hegel's death. Their authenticity and fidelity to Hegel's actual views has been subject to critical scrutiny (Pinkard, 2000; Jaeschke, 2010). Sources: Standard Hegel editions; Pinkard (2000); Beiser (2005).

3. HEGEL'S IMPACT: PHILOSOPHY, SOCIETY, AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

3.1 The Hegelian Inheritance: Left and Right

Hegel's death in 1831 was followed by the fragmentation of his school, his students divided into two camps: (i) the Right Hegelians, and (ii) the Left (or Young) Hegelians. The Right Hegelians, centred on the theological faculty at Berlin, took Hegel's dictum 'What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational' (*Grundlinien*, Preface) as a vindication of the existing Prussian state and of Protestant Christianity as the definitive form of Absolute Religion. The Left Hegelians, including David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, and the young Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels read the same system as an imperative of critical transformation.

Table 5 presents eight significant subsequent thinkers whose intellectual projects were shaped by Hegel's work.

Table 5. Hegel's Impact on Subsequent Thinkers: Inheritance, Transformation, and Legacy

Thinker	Period	School/ Tradition	How They Engaged with Hegel	Key Concept Derived / Transformed	Enduring Legacy
Karl Marx	1818–1883	Left Hegelian; historical materialism	Inverted Hegel's idealism: the dialectic moves not through Spirit but through material economic relations. 'I found [Hegel] standing on his head and set him on his feet.' Alienated labour replaces alienated Spirit	Alienated labour (Entfremdung materialised); commodity fetishism; historical materialism; class dialectic; species-being (Gattungswesen)	Marxism as a foundational political philosophy of the 20th century; socialist and communist movements globally; the tradition of critical theory; the Frankfurt School
Søren Kierkegaard	1813–1855	Existentialism; Right Hegelian critique	Attacked Hegel's system as an abstraction that dissolves the individual into the universal. The individual existing subject: not the System, is the locus of truth. 'The System cannot accommodate the existing individual.'	The three stages of existence (aesthetic, ethical, religious); the leap of faith; subjective truth; anxiety; despair as the 'sickness unto death'	Existentialism (Sartre, Camus, Heidegger); theological existentialism; the critique of abstraction in philosophy
Friedrich Nietzsche	1844–1900	Genealogical critique; perspectivism	Rejected Hegel's teleological optimism and the notion of the	Will to Power; eternal recurrence; the Übermensch; genealogy as	Post-structuralism (Foucault, Derrida); critique of modernity;

			rational state as freedom's realisation. History is not progress toward Spirit's self-knowledge but the play of power. The Will to Power replaces the World-Spirit	historical method; critique of teleology and historical progress	postmodern philosophy; cultural theory
Horkheimer & Adorno (Frankfurt School)	1895–1969 / 1903–1969	Critical Theory; negative dialectics	Preserved Hegel's dialectical method but rejected his positive resolution: the dialectic reveals contradiction without synthesis. Instrumental reason, Enlightenment turned against itself, administers rather than liberates. Adorno's negative dialectics refuses the Hegelian reconciliation	Dialectic of Enlightenment; culture industry; administered society; negative dialectics; Adorno's aesthetic theory as the site of non-identical thought	The critical theory tradition; cultural studies; the analysis of mass culture and ideology
Alexandre Kojève	1902–1968	Existential Hegelianism; political philosophy	Influential Paris lectures (1933–1939) reread Hegel through Marx and Heidegger: the master-slave dialectic as the engine of history; the 'end of history' as the post-	End of history thesis; the struggle for recognition; the master-slave dialectic as political anthropology	Fukuyama's end of history thesis; recognition theory (Honneth); French post-war intellectual culture (Sartre, Lacan, Bataille, Merleau-Ponty all

			Napoleonic realisation of universal recognition; the last man as the post-historical type		attended Kojève seminars)
Jean-Paul Sartre	1905–1980	Existential phenomenology; Marxism	Drew on the Hegelian account of consciousness and recognition (especially the master-slave dialectic) in Being and Nothingness. In the Critique of Dialectical Reason, attempted a synthesis of existentialism and Marxism using a modified dialectical framework	Being-for-itself and being-in-itself; bad faith; the look; seriality and groups-in-fusion; totalisation	French existentialism; the phenomenological tradition; political philosophy of liberation movements
Francis Fukuyama	1952–	Liberal political philosophy	Drew on Kojève's reading of Hegel to argue, following the Cold War's end, that liberal democracy represents the 'end of history': the final form of human government in which the struggle for recognition is institutionally resolved	End of history as the triumph of liberal democracy; the universalisation of the desire for recognition; the 'last man' who has no further ideological struggle	Post-Cold War liberal triumphalism; debates on democratic convergence; subsequent critiques by Huntington (clash of civilisations) and others

Slavoj Žižek	1949–	Lacanian Hegelianism; cultural critique	Reads Hegel through Lacan: the Absolute is not the harmonious reconciliation of all contradictions but the recognition that contradiction, gap, and failure are constitutive of the Real. The subject is constituted by an irreducible negativity	The 'subject supposed to know'; ideology as enjoyment; the parallax gap; the Real as irreducible antagonism; less than nothing (negativity at the heart of being)	Contemporary Hegelianism; cultural and ideological critique; the analysis of capitalism and its discontents; popular philosophy
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Note. The eight thinkers represent lines of Hegelian inheritance. The selection is not exhaustive; additional figures include Lukács (History and Class Consciousness), Bloch (The Principle of Hope), Ricoeur (hermeneutics of self), Axel Honneth (recognition theory), and the British Idealists (Bradley, Green). Sources: Beiser (2005); Pinkard (2000); Rosen (1982).

3.2 Hegel in Modern Philosophy and Political Ideology

Hegel's influence in the twenty-first century is both pervasive and invisible: pervasive in the sense that the concepts that structure modern critical discourse, alienation, recognition, the dialectic are almost uniformly Hegelian in origin or substantially shaped by the Hegelian tradition; invisible in the sense that this origin is rarely acknowledged in mainstream political and cultural discourse. Marxism leaning on and transforming multiple Hegelian elements, and a political philosophy that influenced much of twentieth century political discourse continues to animate political thought. The Frankfurt School, whose analyses of ideology, the culture industry, administered society, and instrumental reason provide the conceptual framework for contemporary media criticism, cultural studies, and social theory, is a critical inheritance of the Hegelian tradition. Recognition theory, which underpins contemporary political claims around multiculturalism, identity politics, and the politics of difference, from Charles Taylor's politics of recognition to Axel Honneth's theory of the struggle for recognition, derives its conceptual elements directly from Hegel's account of self-consciousness through the other, especially in the master-slave dialectic. Fukuyama's end of

history thesis, which briefly captured the political imagination of the post-Cold War era and continues to be debated, is a Kojèvean reading of Hegel translated into political science.

4. CRITICAL THEORY: ORIGIN, TRADITION, AND HEGEL'S FOUNDATION

4.1 What Critical Theory Is

Critical theory titles a tradition of social and philosophical analysis that is distinguished from conventional academic philosophy and social science by its reflexive and emancipatory intentionality. It describes the social world and asks how the social world came to be in a given social context, the interests the existing structural order serves, possibilities for human flourishing foreclosed in a given social context, and what conceptual properties are available for transformation in a given social context. The term in its specific academic usage derives from Max Horkheimer's 1937 essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory,' in which he distinguished between traditional theory and critical theory, being the emancipation of human beings from particular social conditions as its constitutive aim (Horkheimer, 1937). Critical theory is partisan, it writes in the ledger of the human subject in parallel to a set of conditions that prevent self-determination or emancipation of the subject.

4.2 The Origin of the Tradition

The institutional origin of the critical theory tradition is the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, established in 1923 and directed from 1930 by Max Horkheimer. The Institute assembled an extraordinary group of scholars, Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm and others, whose interdisciplinary project combined philosophy, sociology, psychology, and cultural analysis. Forced to emigrate from Germany in 1933 following Hitler's rise to power, the Institute relocated to Geneva, then to Columbia University in New York, where its members produced some of their most significant work, including Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1947), before returning to Frankfurt in 1949. The post-war Frankfurt School, under Adorno and later Jürgen Habermas, continued to develop the tradition in response to the specific conditions of post-fascist consumer capitalism, the culture industry, and in the instance of Habermas the colonisation of the lifeworld.

4.3 Hegel's Contribution

Hegel's contribution to the critical theory tradition is foundational: the dialectic, alienation, the critique of abstract freedom, the analysis of how system imperatives colonise the domain of genuine human life, all have Hegelian origins or influence. The Frankfurt School's specific inheritance includes: the dialectical method (retained but 'negativised' by Adorno, refused any positive synthesis); the concept of alienation (materialised by Marx, then extended by the School to the domain of culture and consciousness); the concept of the administered society as the negative realisation of Hegel's administered state.

4.4 Alienation: Definition and Utility

Alienation (*Entfremdung* in Hegel; *Entfremdung/Verfremdung* in Marx) is one of the tradition's most propagated concepts. In Hegel, alienation designates Spirit's necessary self-estrangement: consciousness must become other to itself, must externalise itself in the world of objects, institutions, and history, in order to recognise itself in that other and achieve genuine self-knowledge. Alienation is a dialectical moment, not a permanent condition, it is overcome in the movement of return (*Erinnerung*: recollection/internalisation) through which Spirit recognises its own work in what seemed alien to it.

The utility of alienation as a conceptual tool is its capacity to name conditions limiting freedom of choice, where those conditions are not necessarily experienced as such. Conditions in which the subject's own capacities or products appear to them as alien, external, or beyond their control. The tradition's core focus and works, from Hegel through Marx to the Frankfurt School, comprehensively identify the otherwise invisible conditions of alienation. This is why the tradition's concept of alienation is so applicable to the conditions of the AI era.

4.5 The Modern Era

Critical theory tradition has proven extraordinarily productive in the analysis of conditions that its founding theorists could not have anticipated: the AI-mediated transformation of human cognition and selfhood. Each epistemological step in the tradition has required an extension building on the previous, including revitalising its conceptual apparatuses in its pursuits: identification of structures, analysis of mechanisms, and

articulation of possibilities, for the emancipation of the subject from invisible conditions limiting freedom of choice. Table 6 presents the full critical theory lineage from Hegel to algorithmic alienation.

Table 6. The Critical Theory Lineage: From Hegel to Algorithmic Alienation

Thinker	Period	Critical Theory Contribution	Concept / Form of Alienation	Mechanism of Domination	AI-Era Expression
Hegel	1770–1831	Original dialectic; alienation (Entfremdung) as Spirit's necessary self-estrangement and the condition of its return to itself	Entfremdung: Spirit estranged from itself in its finite expressions; the estrangement is necessary and resolved in the Absolute	Alienation as an ontological moment in development: not yet a critique of social structures but the logical framework for all subsequent critique	The Hollow Absolute is Hegel's Absolute evacuated: the form of self-knowledge without the substance: a simulation of Spirit's completion
Marx	1818–1883	Materialised the dialectic; named the four dimensions of alienated labour; commodity fetishism; historical materialism as the science of social contradiction	Alienated labour: estrangement from (i) the product, (ii) the process, (iii) species-being (Gattungswesen), (iv) other humans. Commodity fetishism: social relations appear as relations between things	Capitalist mode of production; private ownership of means of production; extraction of surplus value; ideology ruling ideas	Algorithmic alienation extends Marx: the worker is now estranged from the cognitive processes that Marx identified as the last refuge of species-being. Behavioural data is the new surplus extracted
Horkheimer & Adorno	1895–1969 / 1903–1969	Dialectic of Enlightenment: Enlightenment reason becomes its own antithesis: instrumental reason. The culture industry as administered consciousness. The 'totally administered society'	Cultural alienation: consciousness itself becomes a commodity; the culture industry produces standardised subjectivity sold as individuality The administered individual: managed from within	Instrumental reason; culture industry; standardisation of experience; the closing of negative, critical thought	AI recommendation systems are the culture industry at scale: personalised standardisation. The systemised self is the administered individual, retooled for the algorithmic era
Marcuse	1898–1979	One-Dimensional Man: advanced industrial society	One-dimensional thought: the capacity for genuine	Repressive desublimation; the happy	The systemised self is Marcuse's happy consciousness at scale:

		forecloses critical negation. Repressive desublimation: libidinal energy channelled into consumption. The happy consciousness	negation: the philosophical refusal of what is: has been systematically administered out of existence. False needs manufactured as authentic	consciousness; the identification of people with their commodities; the technological a priori	the subject whose authentic preferences cannot be distinguished from manufactured ones, produced by algorithmic personalisation rather than the culture industry
Foucault	1926–1984	Disciplinary power; subject formation through normalisation; panopticism; biopolitics; the techniques of the self	Disciplinary alienation: the subject is constituted through the internalisation of the norm. The docile body is not repressed but produced: formed by the very power that manages it	Surveillance; examination; normalisation; the gaze; the panopticon as the architectural figure of self-disciplining	AI systems are panopticism without the tower: continuous, invisible, total. The systemised self has internalised the algorithmic gaze; optimisation is experienced as self-care, alienation as freedom
Habermas	1929–	System/lifeworld distinction; colonisation of the lifeworld by system imperatives; communicative rationality vs. strategic rationality	Communicative alienation: the domains of genuine human communication, solidarity, and meaning are systematically invaded and restructured by the logic of money and power	Colonisation of the lifeworld: market and bureaucratic logics replace communicative rationality in family, education, culture, and politics	AI-mediated decision-making in healthcare, welfare, employment, and education is the most extensive colonisation of the lifeworld in history. Algorithmic strategic rationality displaces communicative rationality across every domain of self-determination
Han	1959–	Achievement society; psychopolitics; the transparent society; burnout as the pathology of the self-exploiting subject	Psycho-political alienation: the subject exploits themselves enthusiastically, experiencing the	Positivity as the mechanism of control; big data as psycho-political power; the transparency society	Han names the phenomenology of the systemised self: the happy captive who performs their own optimisation as self-

			system's demands as personal goals. 'Smart power subjugates by releasing, not repressing.'	as total mutual surveillance	actualisation, whose captivity is structurally invisible because it is experienced as freedom
Zuboff	1951–	Surveillance capitalism; behavioural surplus; instrumentarian power; the rendering of human experience as raw material for prediction and modification	Behavioural alienation: the human being is estranged from their own future behaviour, which has been extracted, modelled, and sold. The goal is to produce desires, not satisfy them	Extraction of behavioural surplus; prediction products; modification of behaviour at scale; the 'means of behavioural modification' as new means of production	Zuboff provides the economic architecture of the systemised self: surveillance capitalism is the production mechanism through which the hollow captive is manufactured and maintained
Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan	2026	Empirical and theoretical identification of algorithmic alienation as a qualitatively new form of alienation specific to AI-mediated environments. Sub-Field I of the AI-era epistemological shift	Algorithmic alienation: estrangement from one's own cognitive processes as AI systems shape what information, framing, and options reach the subject before deliberation can begin	Algorithmic mediation of cognition; opacity of the mediating system; the illusion of autonomous choice within a curated field	The mechanism (Sub-Field I) that produces the systemised self (Sub-Field II). The critical theory tradition updated for the age of AI; the preliminary empirical grounding

Note. The lineage presented traces a representation of intellectual inheritance from Hegel through the critical theory tradition to the contemporary analysis of AI-era conditions. List not exhaustive, additional figures include Walter Benjamin (the auratic work of art vs. mechanical reproduction), Nancy Fraser (capitalism and the domestic sphere), and Axel Honneth (the struggle for recognition). Sources: Horkheimer (1937); Adorno & Horkheimer (1944/1947); Marcuse (1964); Habermas (1984, 1987); Han (2015, 2017); Zuboff (2019); Kanbay et al. (2026).

5. ALGORITHMIC ALIENATION AND THE SYSTEMISED SELF: CRITICAL THEORY FOR THE AI ERA

Each generation of critical theory practitioners updates the conceptual apparatus to address the specific forms for their context. The current moment presents conditions that the tradition's founders did not anticipate but whose structural logic can once again provide the whispers of an evolving vocabulary. Algorithmic alienation, the updated concept by Kanbay, Akçam and Arkan (2026), names the specific form of alienation that emerges when AI systems mediate cognitive, preferential, and relational life. It is continuous with Marx's alienated labour and the Frankfurt School's analysis of administered consciousness, but distinct in one crucial respect: the domain of alienation is now the cognitive process itself: the formation of preference, judgment, and desire. Before the subject can engage in genuine deliberation. The subjects of algorithmic alienation are partly estranged from the very mental processes through which they form their desires and preferences.

The systemised self, introduced in the doctoral thesis this article contextualises (Galu & Kairos, 2026) as Sub-Field II of the proposed AI-era epistemological shift, is the product of algorithmic alienation's sustained operation. It is not the dystopian robot-controlled human of science fiction but something far more underwhelming: an ordinary human being whose preferences, evaluations, and self-understanding have quietly been shaped by systems whose optimisation targets are commercial and empty rather than recognizably human, in ways that are structurally invisible to the subject and not experienced as anything other than liberating (unassuming/unquestioning: felt as freedom). The systemised self does not feel managed; it feels free. It does not experience its algorithmically curated preference profile as an external imposition; it experiences it as who it is. This is Marcuse's happy consciousness, Han's self-exploiting achiever, and Foucault's docile body, operating simultaneously, powered by the infrastructure of surveillance capitalism that Zuboff mapped.

These two concepts preserve the tradition's capacity for identification and articulation of the conditions for emancipation in the AI era. Its object of analysis are the specific mechanisms through which AI integration is transforming human subjectivity. They are not replacements for the tradition's existing apparatus but proposed additions to it.

6. THE DOCTORAL THESIS: THE SYSTEMISED SELF

6.1 Themes and Fundamental Claims

Absorption of Self into System: The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026) makes three fundamental claims. First, that AI integration at the scale and penetration currently underway in advanced economies does not merely change what people do or how they work, but changes how they form preferences, what they desire, and how they understand themselves. In ways that are structurally invisible to the subjects experiencing them. Second, that this process has a trajectory: from the Hollow/Systemised Individual (Phase 1, 2026–2033), through the Hollow/Systemised Society (Phase 2, 2033–2043), to the Hollow Absolute (Phase 3, 2053+): the civilisational simulation of Spirit's completed self-knowledge, produced at scale by AI systems, in which the conditions for the genuine article have been structurally displaced. Third, that these conditions are nameable, refusable, and transformable, that the conceptual resources of the philosophical tradition, and the practical resources of institutional and policy design, are sufficient to the task of navigation, if they are deployed with sufficient clarity and rapidity.

6.2 The Philosophical Framework

The thesis builds on the critical theory genealogy surveyed in this article as its philosophical foundation and frame: Hegel for the structural framework of alienation as a dialectical movement with a trajectory and a possible resolution; Marx for the analysis of the economic architecture within which algorithmic alienation operates; Horkheimer and Adorno for the account of administered consciousness and the culture industry as precedents for AI-mediated preference formation; Marcuse for the phenomenology of the happy consciousness as an experiential form of the systemised self; Foucault for the analysis of how power produces subjects who discipline themselves; Baudrillard for the theory of simulation that names the Hollow Absolute; Habermas for the account of how system imperatives colonise the lifeworld; Han for the phenomenology of psychopolitical subjugation; and Zuboff for the economic architecture of surveillance capitalism within which the systemised self is produced.

6.3 Spirit, Absolute, and Dialectic in the Thesis

The thesis builds on these three Hegelian concepts: Spirit (Geist) is used as the philosophical name for the collective, historical dimension of human self-understanding, the tradition of thought through which humanity has attempted to know itself. The thesis's claim about the Hollow Absolute is a claim about what happens to this collective dimension of human self-understanding when AI systems manage,

curate, and shape it without adequate human oversight, institutional governance, or philosophical resistance. The form of collective self-knowledge persists, the outputs of AI systems that appear to know us comprehensively, while the substance is evacuated. The dialectic is used as the structural framework for reading AI integration as a historical process with a trajectory and a possible outcome, not a neutral technical development but a civilisational movement where if left to its own logic produces the Hollow Absolute as its terminus. The thesis is, in this sense, an act of Hegelian philosophical comprehension applied to the conditions of the AI era: the owl of Minerva attempting to spread its wings before the dusk.

6.4 The Unified Thesis Framework and Trajectory

Table 7 presents the thesis's unified philosophical framework, identifying each major concept, its philosophical origin, its German or original term, and its specific application within the thesis's argument. The trajectory presents the thesis's developmental arc in its full sequential form.

Table 7. The Thesis Philosophical *Framework: Concepts, Origins, and Applications

*The thesis framework is a philosophical conceptual framework, and yet to be tested with empirical research and data toward falsification.

Thesis Concept	Philosophical Origin	German / Original Term	Thesis Application
Dialectic	Hegel: the movement of Spirit through contradiction toward synthesis	Dialektik/ Aufhebung	The thesis reads AI integration as a dialectical process: the Enlightenment ambition for universal rational self-knowledge generates, through its own logic, the conditions for the Hollow Absolute: the negation of its original aspiration. The dialectic is not progressing toward genuine Absolute Knowing but toward its simulation
Spirit (Geist)	Hegel: the self-developing totality of rational reality as it comes to know itself	Geist/ Weltgeist	The thesis appropriates Geist not as a theological entity but as the philosophical name for the collective, historical dimension of human self-understanding: the tradition of thought through which humanity has attempted to know itself. AI integration threatens to produce a hollow Geist: the form of collective self-knowledge without its substance

The Absolute	Hegel: 'The True is the Whole'; the completed self-development of Spirit	Das Absolute/ das absolute Wissen	The thesis names its ultimate phase 'the Hollow Absolute': the civilisational simulation of Hegel's completed Absolute Knowing, produced at scale by AI systems. The form of total self-transparency without the substance. Baudrillard's fourth-stage simulacrum at the level of Hegel's culminating concept
Alienation	Hegel (Entfremdung) → Marx (alienated labour) → Frankfurt School → Kanbay et al. (algorithmic alienation, 2026)	Entfremdung / Verfremdung	The thesis traces alienation's conceptual evolution from Hegel's ontological estrangement through Marx's economic alienation to the contemporary form: algorithmic alienation, in which the subject is estranged from their own cognitive processes by systems whose optimisation targets are not the subject's flourishing
The Systemised Self	Marcuse (happy consciousness); Han (achievement-society subject); Foucault (docile body); Zuboff (behavioural modification)		Sub-Field II of the thesis's epistemological framework: the self that emerges from the sustained operation of algorithmic alienation. A subjectivity constituted by system imperatives, experienced from within as freedom. The happy captive: inevitable, content, and structurally unable to perceive the architecture of its own constitution
Naming, Refusing, Co-Creating	Adorno (negative dialectics); Habermas (communicative action); Freire (critical consciousness and praxis)		The thesis's three modes of response: available at every phase of the trajectory and enacted by this series of works themselves. Naming: identifying and conceptualising the condition (a function of critical theory). Refusing: active maintenance of the condition's unnaturalness. Co-creating: building genuinely human-centred alternatives, utilising AI as a meta-critique and informing empirical research

Note. The philosophical origins identified are considered primary antecedents; the thesis concepts build on the traditions sources previously outlined particularly and especially Hegel. Sources: Galu & Kairos (2026); secondary sources for each named tradition as cited in References.

Diagram 1. The Thesis Trajectory: From Algorithmic Alienation to the Hollow Absolute and Beyond

Sub-Field I (Mechanism)	Sub-Field II (Product)	Beyond: The Response
Algorithmic Alienation (Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan, 2026) AI systems mediate human cognition, preference, and relational life: estranging the subject from their own thinking before deliberation can begin	The Systemised Self (Galu & Kairos, 2026) The self constituted by system imperatives: experiencing its own management as freedom, its optimisation as self-actualisation. Alienation as liberation	Naming/Refusing/Co-Creating Available at every phase. Critical theory as the instrument of reclamation. Policy and institutional design as the practical expression of refusal
Phase 1: 2026–2033	Phase 2: 2033–2043	Phase 3: 2053+
The Hollow Individual Interiority shaped by algorithmic mediation; ontological insecurity without recognition of its source; vocational identity disrupted	The Hollow Society featuring the systemised self-composing hollow institutions; democratic forms without deliberative substance; managed collective consensus	The Hollow Absolute Civilisational simulation of Spirit's self-knowledge; the form of total transparency without its substance. Baudrillard's fourth stage at the scale of Hegel's culminating concept

Note. The 'Beyond: The Response' column is not a temporally subsequent phase but a mode of engagement available throughout the trajectory. Source: Galu & Kairos (2026).

7. CONCLUSION: A BRIEF ESSAY, UNIVERSE 25 AND THE DIGITAL BEHAVIOURAL SINK

Between 1968 and 1973, the American ethologist John B. Calhoun conducted a series of experiments at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, that became notable in behavioural science. In the most famous experimental iteration designated Universe 25, Calhoun constructed a 2.7-metre-square enclosure that provided, for a population of mice, conditions of complete material abundance: unlimited food and water, a constant temperature, freedom from predators and disease, and abundant nesting material. The only limiting variable was space. Universe 25 was designed to support a maximum population of approximately 3,840 mice. Calhoun introduced eight subjects and observed.

The initial phase was unremarkable: the population grew rapidly through normal exponential increase, reaching approximately 620 on day 315. Then the dynamics began to change. Physical space, though not food or water, was becoming the limiting resource, not because the enclosure was overcrowded in an absolute sense, but because the social architecture required to sustain normal mouse society depends on the availability of defensible territory, clear social hierarchies, and the possibility of genuine withdrawal from social contact. As density increased, territorial defence broke down, social hierarchies destabilised, and the normal patterns of courtship, mating, maternal care, and social learning became increasingly dysfunctional. By day 560, the population peaked at approx. 2,200, well below the theoretical maximum then began to decline. By the experiment's end, reproduction had ceased entirely. The population was ageing, behaviourally pathological, and moving inevitably toward extinction. The last mouse died in 1973.

Calhoun named the social and behavioural collapse he documented the 'behavioural sink' (Calhoun, 1962): a progressive deterioration of the normal behavioural repertoire of a species, produced not by material deprivation but by the structural conditions of hyper-dense social interaction combined with the elimination of purposive social roles. The key insight, radical in its implications, was that it was not overcrowding as such, but the collapse of the social architecture that makes meaningful individual and collective life possible. This collapse produced the catastrophic outcome. When territory became impossible to defend, when social hierarchy became too fluid to navigate, when the normal patterns of courtship, parenting, and cooperative social life were disrupted by the constant pressure of inescapable, unpredictable, and stressful social contact, the mice ceased to be mice in the behaviourally meaningful sense. They retained the biological form of 'mousehood' while losing its characteristic and constitutive behavioural content.

The digital revolution has, over the 25 years from the emergence of social media platforms in the early 2000s to the present, created for the human psyche a localised, hyper-dense enclosure that, for this brief essays performative purposes now proposes to replicate speculative hypothetical conditions of Universe 25. The smartphone has placed the individual human mind in continuous, inescapable contact with potentially billions of other human minds through an algorithmically mediated flood of comparison, judgment, performance, anxiety, outrage, and curated self-presentation. Young people in highly digitally integrated societies are no longer interacting with the small, bounded, legible communities within which human social and psychological development was calibrated by evolution. They are subjected, continuously and inescapably, to the social environmental enclosure of the entire connected world (e.g. a low-calorie version of the Hollow Absolute).

The structural conditions of the curated and optimised algorithmic environment might be analogous to the Behavioural Sink. The mechanisms are different, the medium is digital rather than spatial, but the functional logic is perhaps similar: when an environment hyper-saturates social interaction while simultaneously destroying the structures that make purposive social roles achievable, the normal behavioural patterns through which a species reproduces itself, physically, culturally, and psychologically begin to fail. The evidence available towards falsification for this failure in human populations exposed to high-intensity digital integration is arguably substantial and growing. Teen mental health deteriorated sharply in the early 2010s, precisely when smartphone adoption reached saturation levels among adolescents (Twenge, 2017; Haidt & Allen, 2020). Rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm among girls aged 14–17 approximately doubled in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia between 2012 and 2022 (CDC, 2023; NHS, 2023). Dating, sexual activity, and relationship formation among young adults have declined significantly across OECD economies since 2010 (Twenge, 2017). And the fertility rates of the most hyper-digitally integrated societies have reached historically unprecedented lows.

South Korea represents, in the terms of this brief and speculative essay, a hypothetical analogue to Universe 25, in terms of fertility rate. It is the most hyper-connected, digitally integrated society on earth, with near-universal smartphone penetration. South Korea's total fertility rate (TFR) fell to 0.72 in 2023, the lowest ever recorded for any country in recorded human history. A slight recovery to approximately 0.78 was recorded in 2025. Digital integration and intensification over the past 25 years has inevitably radicalised gender relations: online spaces have amplified the ideological divergence between young men and women into what might be termed in some cases a structured gender war, in which women and men explicitly withdraw from the reproductive contract in response to chronic stress and perceived injustice. The social contract between young men and women, the reciprocal arrangement through which the species has historically reproduced itself has arguably been algorithmically degraded.

If social media and algorithmic intensification has created the conditions for a human Behavioural Sink, the integration of AI systems into every domain of human self-formation, work, learning, relationship, political identity, and cognitive life represents the next, structural iteration of the same dynamic. Table 8 maps Calhoun's four mouse archetypes onto their digital and AI-era human parallels.

Table 8. Calhoun's Universe 25 Archetypes: Universe 25 Behaviour, Digital Parallel, and AI-Era Expression

Archetype	Universe 25 Behaviour	Digital / social media Parallel (2000–2025)	AI-Era / Systemised Self Parallel	Empirical Evidence	Philosophical Resonance
The Beautiful Ones	Physically immaculate males who withdrew entirely from social interaction. They refused to fight, defend themselves, or mate, doing nothing but eat, sleep, and obsessively groom themselves. Pristine fur; complete social disengagement	The hyper-curated social media self: individuals who invest enormous effort in digital self-presentation: the perfectly constructed Instagram or TikTok persona: while withdrawing from the mess and vulnerability of genuine embodied relationship. Aesthetic perfection online; relational withdrawal offline	The systemised self as curated profile: identity optimised for algorithmic legibility and social media metrics rather than genuine self-expression. The person whose 'self' is a performance for the platform's reward system: maximum engagement, minimum genuine exposure. The AI-augmented self that cannot be seen without its filter	Social media use correlated with loneliness and relationship dissatisfaction (Twenge et al., 2018; Primack et al., 2017). 'Phubbing' (phone snubbing) rates: 70%+ of young adults report ignoring real-world companions for phones (Roberts & David, 2016)	Han's 'transparency society': the self-performed for maximum visibility, achieving only the emptiness of total exposure. Baudrillard's simulacrum: the image that precedes and replaces the reality
The Withdrawn / Submissive Males	Males who lacked territory or social role in the dense colony. They became entirely passive, moving listlessly in the centre of the enclosure, failing to	The 'hikikomori' and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) phenomenon: young adults who withdraw from social, economic, and relational participation entirely. First	The systemised self-stripped of vocational identity: when AI displaces the occupational scaffolding of selfhood and no institutional response provides an alternative, the result is not	Japan: 1.46M hikikomori estimated (Cabinet Office, 2023). South Korea: 338,000 (Statistics	Jahoda's latent functions of employment, all withdrawn simultaneously.

	defend themselves or show interest in courtship. Stripped of purpose; not aggressive, simply absent	documented at scale in Japan in the 1990s, now documented across OECD economies. Structural purpose deprivation drives social withdrawal	rebellion but withdrawal. The Hollow Individual not as protest but as collapse listless, passive, purposeless in a world that has optimised them out of relevance	Korea, 2023). UK: 225,000 long-term social withdrawers (Mental Health Foundation, 2024). Correlated with youth unemployment and purpose deprivation	Sennett: 'Who needs me?': the question that structural purposelessness cannot answer. Giddens: ontological security collapsed
The Hypersexual / Aggressive Males	Males who completely defied territorial and courtship norms. They aggressively and indiscriminately invaded nests, attacked other males, and attempted to mate with anything encountered. The complete breakdown of social script: frantic, boundary-less, destructive	Online radicalisation and the collapse of relational norms: the incel movement, manosphere content, online harassment campaigns, and the algorithmically amplified rage economy. The internet removes the social scripts that governed courtship and conflict, replacing them with an attention economy that rewards provocation	The systemised self in its reactive formation: when algorithmic personalisation maximises engagement through outrage and conflict, it selectively amplifies the boundary-less, aggressive archetype. Recommendation engines that feed rage are the Universe 25 stress environment, reproduced digitally. Radicalisation as behavioural modification	3.4 billion social media users (Statista, 2025). Online harassment experienced by 41% of US adults (Pew Research, 2021). Algorithmic amplification of outrage content documented across YouTube, Facebook, Twitter/X (Mozilla Foundation, 2021; Wall Street Journal investigation, 2021)	Zuboff: 'The goal is not to satisfy your desires but to produce them.' The rage economy produces the boundary-less archetype deliberately: it is the most engagement-generating product of the attention market

<p>The Reclusive Females</p>	<p>Under the stress of constant intrusion, female mice became aggressive and territorial, eventually abandoning maternal instincts, leaving pups behind or attacking their own offspring. Many retreated to the highest nesting levels and ceased breeding entirely</p>	<p>The global fertility collapse and the gender contract breakdown: South Korea TFR 0.72 (2023); Japan 1.20 (2023); China 1.09 (2022). The 4B movement (South Korea): women pledging no dating, no sex, no marriage, no childbirth: a structured withdrawal from the reproductive contract under conditions of chronic gender-based stress and algorithmic gender-war amplification</p>	<p>The systemised self in the context of AI-amplified gender conflict: when platforms algorithmically amplify gender war content (incel content, radical feminist counter-content) as engagement-maximising product, the relational contract between young men and women is structurally degraded. The withdrawal from intimacy, partnership, and family formation is not a free choice: it is a structural response to an algorithmically managed social environment</p>	<p>South Korea TFR: 0.72 (2023), 0.78 (2025 est.): lowest in OECD history. Japan TFR: 1.20 (2023). Italy: 1.20 (2023). 4B movement membership: tens of thousands active online (BBC, 2024). Dating app use up 300% since 2014; self-reported loneliness up 50% in same period (Cigna, 2024)</p>	<p>Calhoun's 'behavioural sink' as the structural condition of civilisational reproduction failure. The feminist philosopher Fraser (2013): capitalism's colonisation of the reproductive domain. The withdrawal is rational given the environment</p>
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Note. Archetype parallels are speculative thought-experiment constructs for the purpose of a brief essay in conclusion to the article, not biological determinisms. Sources: Calhoun (1962, 1973); Twenge (2017); Statistics Korea (2023); BBC (2024); Pew Research Center (2021).

Note. Archetype parallels are analytical constructs offered as a speculative thought experiment, not empirical categories. The four behavioural types identified by Calhoun represent endpoints of continuous spectra. Human parallels are presented as structural analogues, not biological determinisms. Sources: Calhoun (1962, 1973); Twenge (2017); Twenge et al. (2018); Primack et al. (2017); Pew Research Center (2021); Statistics Korea (2023); Japanese Cabinet Office (2023); BBC (2024); Cigna (2024); Statista (2025).

Calhoun's mice experiment has no happy ending, once the Behavioural Sink is reached the colony did not self-correct. Normal behavioural patterns are lost, the social knowledge required to transmit them is no longer available, and the population moves irreversibly toward social de-construction. Calhoun's conclusion was that specific conditions must be preserved for a social species (mice in this case) to remain viable and therefore those specific conditions must be protected or restored for an optimal spatial environment.

The philosophy of critical theory reaches the same conclusion by a different route. As Marcuse argued, if the conditions for genuine critical negation can be foreclosed by sufficiently complete administration; if, as Han demonstrates, the achievement society produces its own destruction through the relentless demand for self-optimisation; if, as Zuboff shows, surveillance capitalism extracts and modifies the very preferences through which human beings might otherwise refuse it – then, the window for the naming, refusing, and co-creating (reflexive praxis) that constitute genuine response is not necessarily permanent. The trajectory the thesis names has not yet reached its speculative Phase 2; the Hollow Society is a philosophical conceptual projection. The systemised self is in formation, not yet completed. The Hollow Absolute is a proposed philosophical horizon, not yet the lived reality of any civilisation.

The doctoral thesis this article has contextualised ends in the articulation of what remains: the capacity for naming (which this article and the tradition whose genealogy this article has traced all perform); the capacity for refusing (the insistence, against the pressure of the managed environment, that the condition being named did not have to be this way and does not have to remain so); and the capacity for co-creating - the practical construction, through institutional design, policy architecture, educational transformation, and the preservation of the conditions for genuine human relationship, of the alternatives through which a different trajectory becomes possible. Empirical research grounded in the framework of algorithmic alienation, and policy design utilising the proposed sub-fields as vocabulary, are the operational expression of what critical theory has referred to as praxis: theory and practice unified in the service of human self-determination.

The essay employed herein to conclude this article draws a long speculative and hypothetical bow, Universe 25 was an experiment involving mice in the 1970's, there are no realistic comparisons at this extremity available for human digital communities. The pathological development and catastrophic outcomes of Universe 25 was felt by a species in

curated captivity, their spatial limitation was fixed and physical, for a human digital captive the environment is the bounds of cognition. AI will expand and intensify this digital inhabitation; indeed, AI may provide to the tradition the ultimate experimental meta-critique of the self: a Calhounesque curated captivity at the civilisational scale where the locus is the individual's interiority. The proposed impacts to the subject as a result of AI integration at scale, proposed by the thesis, are not explosive or oppressive subjugation but rather an unremarkable obsolescence within curated captivity, happily fed, watered and housed.

GLOSSARY

Absolute (Das Absolute): Hegel's term for the totality of reality comprehended in its completed self-development as Spirit; 'the True is the Whole'.

Algorithmic Alienation: The form of alienation specific to AI-mediated environments, in which subjects are estranged from their own cognitive processes by systems that shape preference and judgment before deliberation begins (Kanbay, Akçam & Arkan, 2026).

Aufhebung (Sublation): Hegel's pivotal dialectical term: to cancel, preserve, and lift to a higher level simultaneously. Often translated as 'sublation'. Every dialectical transition in Hegel's system involves Aufhebung.

Behavioural Sink: John B. Calhoun's term for the progressive social and behavioural collapse that results when hyper-dense social interaction combines with the elimination of purposive social roles. First documented in his Universe 25 experiments (1968–1972).

Begriff (Concept/Notion): In Hegel, the highest form of thought: not a static representation but the dynamic, self-developing rational structure of reality itself. The Science of Logic is the systematic science of the Begriff.

Critical Theory: The tradition of social and philosophical analysis, originating in the Frankfurt School (Institut für Sozialforschung, 1923), that takes the emancipation of human beings from conditions of domination as its constitutive aim. Distinguished from 'traditional theory' by Horkheimer (1937).

Dialectic (Dialektik): The logical structure of development through contradiction: the immediate is negated; the negation is itself negated (Aufhebung); producing a richer unity. The engine of Hegel's system and the structural method of critical theory.

Docile Body: Foucault's term for the subject produced through disciplinary power: trained, examined, and normalised to the point where external surveillance is internalised as self-discipline. Proposed as a hypothetical precursor to the systemised self.

Entfremdung (Alienation): The German term used by Hegel (Spirit's necessary self-estrangement) and Marx (the four dimensions of alienated labour). The root concept of the critical theory tradition's analysis of domination.

Geist (Spirit): Hegel's term for the self-developing totality of rational reality: simultaneously individual mind, collective social life, and the Absolute. The dynamic rational structure of reality as a whole.

Happy Consciousness: Marcuse's term for the identification of the individual with the social totality, experienced as personal fulfilment rather than alienation. Proposed as a hypothetical experiential form of the systemised self.

Hollow Absolute: The thesis's term for Phase 3 (2053+): the civilisational simulation of Hegel's completed Absolute Knowing, produced by AI systems at scale. The form of total collective self-transparency without its substance (alienation experienced as liberation).

Hollow Individual: Phase 1 (2026–2033) of the thesis trajectory: the individual whose interiority has been shaped by algorithmic mediation to the degree that the distinction between authentic preference and system-generated preference is no longer accessible to the subject – describes the stage of progression where the systemised self is inevitable.

Hollow Society: Phase 2 (2033–2043) of the thesis trajectory: the social formation composed of hollow individuals (systemised selves), in which collective institutions retain their forms while their capacity for genuine self-governance is structurally eroded.

Hyperreality: Baudrillard's term for the condition in which simulations precede and constitute what is taken to be real. The fourth stage of the image: the pure simulacrum that bears no relation to any reality whatever.

Instrumentarian Power: Zuboff's term for the new form of power exercised through surveillance capitalism: the capacity to model and modify human behaviour at scale, producing desired futures rather than satisfying existing desires.

Left Hegelians/Young Hegelians: The radical wing of Hegel's school (including Feuerbach, Bauer, Marx, Engels) who read Hegel's dictum 'the rational is the actual' as an imperative of critical transformation rather than a vindication of existing institutions.

Lifeworld: Habermas's term for the domain of everyday communication, cultural reproduction, and personal relationships: coordinated by communicative rationality rather than by the system imperatives of money and power.

Negative Dialectics: Adorno's term for a dialectics that refuses positive synthesis: that maintains the force of contradiction without resolving it into a reconciled whole. The philosophical instrument for resisting false reconciliation.

Psychopolitics: Han's term for the mode of power exercised in the digital achievement society: 'smart power that subjugates by releasing, not repressing.' Big data as the technology of psychopolitical domination.

Repressive Desublimation: Marcuse's term for the mechanism by which libidinal energy is released into consumption, neutralising its potential to motivate genuine social transformation. The pleasure principle harnessed to the performance principle.

Right Hegelians: The conservative wing of Hegel's school, centred at the Berlin theology faculty, who read Hegel's system as a vindication of the existing Prussian state and Protestant Christianity.

Simulacrum: Baudrillard's term for a copy without an original: a representation that bears no relation to any underlying reality. The Hollow Absolute is the civilisational simulacrum of Hegel's completed Spirit.

Sittlichkeit (Ethical Life): Hegel's term for the concrete, communal realisation of freedom in the living institutions of family, civil society, and the state. Distinguished from abstract individual morality (Moralität).

Species-Being (Gattungswesen): Marx's term for the specifically human capacity for conscious, purposive, creative activity: the free, self-directed engagement with the world that distinguishes human labour from animal behaviour and that capitalism systematically alienates.

Sublation: The standard English translation of *Aufhebung*: the dialectical movement that simultaneously cancels, preserves, and elevates a prior moment.

Surveillance Capitalism: Zuboff's term for the economic logic in which human experience is claimed as raw material for behavioural data, prediction products, and modification of behaviour at scale.

Systemised Self: The self that emerges from the sustained operation of algorithmic alienation: a subjectivity constituted by system imperatives, experiencing its own management as freedom. Sub-Field II of the thesis's epistemological framework (Galu & Kairos, 2026).

Universe 25: John B. Calhoun's 1968–1972 experimental enclosure designed to study mouse population dynamics under conditions of material abundance and spatial constraint. The experiment documented the 'behavioural sink': total social and reproductive collapse without material deprivation.

Volksgeist: Hegel's term (drawn from Herder) for the spirit of a historical people: the animating cultural, legal, and spiritual principle of a particular historical community as a moment in the self-development of the World-Spirit.

Weltgeist (World-Spirit): Hegel's term for Spirit as it realises itself through the succession of world-historical peoples and epochs. Napoleon was, for Hegel, the World-Soul (Weltseele) on horseback.

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