

Encircled Agency

Homovictimus, the Onopticon and Institutionally Defined Insecurity

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Abstract

This article advances the Reality Paradigm as a general theory of power concerned with the prior construction of the conditions under which people can encounter the world, be recognised within it, sustain their lives and act meaningfully. These conditions are increasingly shaped through technical, administrative, legal, financial, proprietary, spatial and affective infrastructures. Its central analytical figure is Homovictimus, a coined analytical term rather than a classical Latin designation. It refers not simply to a victimised person, but to a subject expected to choose, work, apply, self-manage, assume risk and bear responsibility while the material, institutional and temporal conditions required for meaningful agency have already been constrained.

The article's principal intervention is to distinguish sharply between precarity and Homovictimus. Precarity refers to insecurity arising from incomplete, fragile, discontinuous or unreliable institutional protection, particularly in relation to labour, income and social security. Homovictimus, by contrast, emerges through dense institutional processing, conditional recognition and restricted material access. The subject is registered, classified and processed through institutions of welfare, employment, credit, healthcare, mobility, law and digital administration. Access to protection is then mediated by files, profiles, eligibility criteria, deadlines, payment obligations, queues, scores and procedural requirements. The term institutionally defined insecurity denotes insecurity produced and administered through institutional definition, classification and procedural conditionality.

This distinction is not merely terminological. Precarity asks whether a person is covered by rights and protections; Homovictimus asks whether formally recognised rights can be effectively exercised, through which procedures, at what cost and under whose conditions. The governing architecture of this condition is the Onopticon: not a unitary conspiracy or a closed system, but a distributed logic through which data, law, finance, property, platforms, regulation, logistics and sensory design may converge to shape the field of reality before decisions are made. Its constitutive function lies in eroding material alternatives without abolishing formal choice, drawing life trajectories towards increasingly calculable, governable and costly pathways.

Keywords: Homovictimus; Onopticon; Reality Paradigm; precarity; institutionally defined insecurity; encircled agency; social determinism; Packaging Ontology; Existential Blackmail; Fragopticon.

1. Introduction: The State Remains, Institutions Remain, but Homovictimus Lies Beneath Them

The state remains in place, institutions remain in place, employers remain in place; yet Homovictimus is formed beneath their surface.

Social suffering has long been understood through unemployment, poverty and exclusion from the labour market. These categories remain indispensable. Unemployment has not disappeared, nor have the losses of income, status, care and future security that accompany it.

Yet employment no longer guarantees security.

A person may be employed and still live under acute pressure from rent. They may earn an income while losing the practical capacity to move, change work, secure care, maintain health or withstand rising costs. They may enter higher education and encounter not mobility but indebtedness, credential competition and uncertainty. They may approach retirement not as a secure exit from working life, but as a period marked

by declining income, escalating health costs and procedural insecurity.

The contemporary transformation is therefore more than the replacement of unemployment by flexible work. The relevant shift lies elsewhere:

Under certain conditions, institutions of security cease primarily to produce security and become thresholds through which insecurity is distributed, classified and administered.

The dominant social question of the industrial and welfare-state twentieth century concerned who was excluded from work and social protection. The social question of the present concerns who remains within the system while losing the capacity to live, move, contest decisions and construct a future.

This is not a nostalgic claim that education, employment and retirement once guaranteed security for everyone. They did not. Colonial domination, informal labour, gendered divisions of care, racialisation and differentiated regimes of citizenship have always limited the reach of formal protection. Nevertheless, within particular industrial and welfare-state arrangements, the movement from education to employment and retirement operated as an institutional promise of long-term security and upward mobility (Gill and Bakker, 2003; Wood and Gough, 2006).

The argument of this article is not that unemployment has declined quantitatively in every society. It is that unemployment no longer provides an adequate explanatory category for contemporary social exclusion on its own.

Schools, employers, hospitals, social security systems, banks, municipalities, platforms, legal procedures and transport networks remain in place. Their formal existence, however, does not ensure the material continuity of life.

Homovictimus emerges through institutional persistence under conditions in which security becomes conditional, procedural and market-dependent.

The question, then, is not merely why people are unemployed. It is why people may lose the capacity to sustain life while studying, working, travelling, paying rent, seeking care, borrowing, applying for assistance or approaching retirement.

The Reality Paradigm begins not with the question, ‘What is power?’, but with another:

Under what conditions can people encounter the world, be recognised within it, move, apply, contest decisions, receive care, produce and construct a future?

2. Insecurity, Precarity and Homovictimus

Three concepts must be distinguished: insecurity, precarity and Homovictimus.

Insecurity refers to the fragility of the material continuity of life. It emerges when income, housing, care, health, mobility, time or the capacity to construct a future becomes unstable.

Precarity refers to the social condition in which such insecurity is concentrated around labour, income, contractual status, social rights and social protection. Its central concerns are unstable employment, low or irregular wages, temporary work, insecure contracts, weak social insurance and uncertain prospects.

Homovictimus refers to a subject form produced when insecurity is no longer confined to labour but is processed across the wider passages of life. It emerges where access to work, care, health, credit, mobility,

law, public services, platforms and recognition is made conditional upon institutional legibility.

The distinction may be stated directly:

Precarity is insecurity within fragile, incomplete or unreliable institutional protection. Homovictimus is insecurity produced through dense institutional processing, conditional recognition and restricted material access.

The precarious subject may have an employer, a contract, a social security number, a bank account or a legal entitlement. Yet the defining problem is that institutional protection remains insufficient, discontinuous, uncertain or difficult to enforce.

Rather than merely being connected to institutions, the subject occupying the Homovictimus position undergoes intensive institutional processing. They are registered, profiled, classified, scored, assessed for eligibility, placed in queues, subjected to verification and admitted only through specified procedures.

The difference should not be reduced to a crude opposition between institutional absence and institutional abundance. Precarious conditions may also involve bureaucratic density. What distinguishes Homovictimus is the centrality of institutional processing itself: security becomes conditional through the forms by which the subject is recognised, classified and made administratively legible.

3. Precarity: Insecurity through Fragile Protection

Precarity is most usefully understood as a condition in which the risks of employment, income, care and social reproduction are transferred to the individual while collective and institutional protections are weakened, fragmented or rendered uncertain.

Its primary questions are familiar:

- Will my job continue?
- Is my income stable and sufficient?
- Am I protected against sickness, unemployment or care obligations?
- Do I have enforceable labour rights?
- Can I plan a future on the basis of my work and income?
- Will my social benefit, insurance entitlement or statutory protection remain available?

The precarious subject experiences insecurity through weak protection. Employment may be temporary; work may be informal; social insurance may be absent or partial; legal rights may exist but remain difficult to enforce; care responsibilities may be unsupported; and income may be too unstable to sustain long-term planning.

Precarity therefore foregrounds the relation between labour and protection. Its analytical force comes from exposing the erosion of secure employment, collective bargaining, stable income and welfare guarantees (Kalleberg, 2018; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018; Millar, 2017).

Its defining question is:

‘What protection am I entitled to, does it cover me, and will it remain available?’

The critical achievement of precarity scholarship lies in its exposure of the economic, political and subjective consequences of insecure labour and unstable livelihoods. Its principal analytical focus, however, remains institutional insufficiency: a lack of protection, a withdrawal of protection or an uncertain relation to protection.

Homovictimus begins from another question:

What happens when institutional relations are fully established, yet the terms of institutional recognition themselves become the means through which security is restricted?

4. Homovictimus: Institutionally Defined Insecurity and Encircled Agency

Homovictimus is embedded within institutional life.

The subject may appear as a patient in healthcare, a worker in the labour market, a debtor in finance, a welfare claimant, a platform user, a citizen before the state, a bank customer, a tenant, a claimant before a court or an applicant before an administrative body.

Yet recognition is not equivalent to security.

A person may be formally recognised as a rights-holder while being able to exercise those rights only through prescribed documents, deadlines, digital channels, income thresholds, eligibility criteria, payment obligations and procedural burdens.

Homovictimus is recognised as a rights-holder, but the effective exercise of those rights is made conditional upon files, scores, eligibility, payment, waiting, application and procedure.

The insecurity of Homovictimus is therefore defined, specified and operationalised. The person is often excessively visible. They are classified, assessed and placed within institutional categories. Their inclusion occurs in a form that the system can process.

Yet this institutional definition may displace control over the conditions of life from the subject to the infrastructures that classify, assess and govern them.

Homovictimus is recognised without being secured; processed without being enabled to direct the course of life; held responsible while the conditions of responsibility are structurally narrowed.

4.1. The Four Conditions of Homovictimus

Condition	Description
Demand for agency	The subject is expected to choose, work, comply, apply, self-manage and assume responsibility
Institutional definition	The subject is recognised through files, profiles, scores, records, eligibility categories and procedural classifications
Conditional inclusion	The subject is included only in the form recognised by the system
Material constriction	Housing, care, debt, mobility, health, time and contestation costs narrow the subject's practical life trajectory

The combination of these conditions produces encircled agency.

Encircled agency is the condition in which a person is expected to choose, comply and assume responsibility while their capacity to choose, contest decisions, exit, secure care and construct a future is continuously narrowed.

Homovictimism cannot be reduced to the homo economicus. The latter is imagined as an actor who calculates interests within a field of choice. Homovictimism also calculates, but the conditions under which calculation is possible have already been determined elsewhere.

5. The Sharp Distinction between Precarity and Homovictimism

Point of distinction	Precarity	Homovictimism
Primary analytical object	Insecure labour, income and social protection	The field of encounter, life passages and the horizon of agency
Relation to institutions	Fragile, discontinuous, weak or uncertain	Dense, recorded, classified and procedural
Status of rights	Absent, partial, weak or insecure	Formally present, materially conditional
Source of insecurity	Fragile or insufficient protection	Conditional institutional processing and restricted material access
Subjective question	‘Am I covered?’	‘I am covered on paper, but can I actually access what I am entitled to?’
Central mechanism	Transfer of risk to the worker	Packaging, conditional inclusion, eligibility, scoring and the preconstruction of the decision horizon
Temporal experience	Uncertain work and livelihood	Delay, renewal, verification, procedural fatigue and deferred futures
Typical site	Employment, wages, contracts and social insurance	Housing, debt, care, health, mobility, law, applications, payment systems, platforms and time
Political question	How can wages, rights, contracts and social protection be strengthened?	How can the thresholds that precondition access, recognition and life trajectories be made visible and transformed?
Subject form	The insecure worker or subject of unstable livelihood	The responsible but structurally constrained subject

The distinction may be condensed into two propositions:

Precarity emerges where protection is insufficient. Homovictimism emerges where institutional processing, conditional recognition and limited material access structure the person before protection can be effectively realised.

And:

Precarity is insecurity at the edge of protection. Homovictimism is institutionally defined insecurity within the architecture of protection itself.

The two conditions may coexist. A person on a temporary contract, burdened by debt, paying high rent, dependent on digital payment systems, unable to secure care and exhausted by administrative procedures may be both precarious and Homovictimism.

The concepts nevertheless do not perform the same analytical work.

Precarity identifies insecurity in the labour regime. Homovictimus identifies the subject form produced when security, recognition, mobility, care and future-making are prestructured through Onoptic thresholds.

6. Beyond the Centrality of Unemployment: The Dissolution of the Security Chain

Unemployment remains important. Yet where employment itself no longer secures life, the analytical centre of the social question must shift.

Unemployment has not disappeared, but it no longer explains social exclusion on its own. Insecurity has become a broader condition that includes unemployment while extending beyond the sphere of work.

Education, employment and retirement are not isolated institutions. Together, they organise the temporal architecture of life.

Life stage	Historical promise of security	Contemporary risk of encirclement
Education	Mobility, occupation and independence	Debt, credential competition, graduate insecurity and compulsory self-investment
Employment	Income, status and social protection	Fragile wages, debt dependence, care pressures and the rising cost of reproduction
Retirement	Secure exit, rest and income continuity	Income erosion, health costs, poverty in old age and administrative uncertainty

The dissolution of this chain does not merely expose individuals to greater risk. It compels them to calculate continuously across every stage of life.

Homovictimus is the person who must continually calculate the conditions of survival while studying, working and approaching retirement.

This is why Homovictimus should not be treated simply as the form of the unemployed person. It is the theoretical figure of the person who may remain employed, educated, insured and institutionally recognised while still being unable to secure the material continuity of life.

7. The Reality Paradigm and the Onopticon

The Reality Paradigm is a general theory of social encirclement. Encirclement does not refer to the closure of life by one institution or one technology. It refers to the convergence of data, law, finance, property, platforms, regulation, markets, logistics, space and affective design in shaping the conditions under which life may be encountered.

The Onopticon is the governing architecture of encirclement: a distributed architecture of governing power.

It is neither a single algorithm nor a state institution, corporation, investment fund or legal regime. These actors may conflict, operate at different scales and pursue distinct interests. The claim of the Onopticon is not that they are centrally coordinated. It is that, under particular conditions, their operations may produce the same structural outcome:

The world within which a person must decide is constructed before the decision is made.

The Panopticon is organised around visibility: who is seen, who is watched and how surveillance becomes internalised. The Onopticon is organised around the field of encounter: through which channels a person will be recognised, which thresholds they must cross, which options will appear realistic and which possibilities will remain closed before they become visible.

The Onopticon is therefore more than a digital continuation of the Panopticon. It concerns the power of preconstructing encounterable reality.

7.1. The Deepening of Social Determinism

The constitutive function of Onoptic architecture does not derive from the subjective intention of one actor. It emerges from the structural logic generated by the combined operation of institutions, corporations, standards, procedures, interfaces and infrastructures.

The constitutive function of Onoptic architecture is to erode material alternatives without abolishing formal choice; to draw life trajectories towards increasingly calculable, governable and costly pathways; and thereby to deepen social determinism.

This is neither metaphysical nor biological determinism. It is social-existential determinism:

The progressive transformation of life trajectories into paths that become more predictable, more obligatory and more difficult to alter through the combined force of access thresholds, costs, procedures and dependencies.

The subject continues to choose, apply, work, consume and contest decisions. Yet the material consequences of these actions are increasingly structured by thresholds that have already been established.

Will is not eliminated. It is directed into trajectories that the system can anticipate, process and govern.

8. Packaging Ontology: The Separation of Recognition from Security

Packaging Ontology does not claim that the essential nature of a person or object has changed. Ontology is used here in an operational sense: it concerns the forms through which a person or object is recognised, processed and made capable of producing institutional consequences.

A person may be a citizen, patient, worker, student or consumer. They may also become a user account, credit profile, health record, risk score, application file, eligibility status or target of sanction.

Level	Operation	Illustration
Representation	A person or object is rendered recordable	Identity record, health file, application form and credit information
Institutional recognition	The record becomes processable	Eligibility profile, service history and payment status
Legal-administrative consequence	Recognition produces priority, refusal, entitlement or sanction	Waiting-list position, credit decision and welfare assessment
Operational consequence	What lies outside the package becomes institutionally ineffective	An undocumented need becomes unprocessable; an unformatted claim becomes invisible

Packaging is therefore more than representation. It is a threshold of effective existence within institutions.

As a person is processed through their packaged form, their authority over the validity of experience beyond that package may weaken.

This is where the separation of recognition from security becomes decisive. A person may be recognised by an institution without being materially secured by it.

What distinguishes Homovictimus is that the form of institutional recognition itself conditions access to security.

Packaging Ontology therefore concerns both classification and the externalisation of representational authority. That authority need not belong to the state alone. It may be distributed across platforms, banks, employers, laboratories, regulators, insurers and technical standards.

9. Existential Blackmail, the Fragopticon and Pre-Structured Regret

9.1. Existential Blackmail

Existential Blackmail does not denote an intentional threat by a single actor. It names the structural conversion of material dependence into compliance pressure.

The concept concerns the way in which the material conditions of continuity — housing, food, healthcare, income, care, mobility and recognition — may become tied to compliance through markets, debt, rent, platforms, insecure employment and institutional dependency.

Field of continuity	Content	Form of encirclement
Material and bodily	Housing, food, health, income and care	Everyday continuity becomes conditional upon compliance
Social	Recognition, belonging, visibility and networks	Fear of status loss, isolation and exclusion
Temporal	Relocation, parenthood, career change, risk-taking and future planning	Deferred futures and narrowing possibilities

No one needs to state the threat directly. When access to housing, health, income or recognition is tied to payment continuity, documentation, eligibility, compatible profiles or procedural compliance, the material consequences of contestation, exit or deviation may become an unspoken pressure towards conformity.

9.2. The Fragopticon

The Fragopticon is the temporal mode of encirclement:

Uncertainty + limited contestability + time = structural paralysis.

The Fragopticon is more than delay. It is a chronic regime of temporal erosion that repeatedly postpones the subject's capacity to exercise control over life.

An application is placed on hold. The justification remains unclear. The person moves between call centres, online forms, missing documents, reference numbers, procedural requirements and repeated submissions. The absence of a decision begins to produce the effects of a decision.

The future ceases to be a project under construction and becomes an administratively hollowed-out period of waiting.

9.3. Pre-Structured Regret

Pre-Structured Regret is the affective form of Homovictimus. The subject withdraws from a possible action before attempting it because the anticipated losses of income, housing, care, status, visibility or belonging appear too great.

Alternative action → anticipated loss → internalised risk → withdrawal from action → compliance appearing as voluntary choice.

This is related to Berlant's account of cruel optimism, yet it has a distinct emphasis. Cruel optimism concerns attachment to a promise of the good life that obstructs flourishing. Pre-Structured Regret concerns the prior foreclosure of an alternative life before it is attempted.

The subject does not simply remain attached to a harmful promise. They may cease to imagine another life as materially possible.

10. Onoptic Structuring and the Imposition Test

Onoptic structuring and the Onoptic Imposition Test do not constitute the whole of the Reality Paradigm. They are micro-analytical instruments for examining whether social encirclement has become concentrated in a particular field, institution or access pathway.

10.1. Onoptic Structuring

Structural condition	Description
Compulsory packaging	Access to rights, services, production or visibility depends upon a prescribed form
Materially narrowed alternatives	Alternative routes may exist formally but are inaccessible in practice
Limited contestability	It becomes difficult to understand, challenge or alter a decision

10.2. Onoptic Imposition

Onoptic imposition is not established automatically when these three conditions are present. It is diagnosed when the access architecture can be shown to contribute causally to material or distributive loss.

Onoptic imposition is the condition in which compulsory packaging, materially narrowed alternatives and limited contestability form an access architecture that can be shown to contribute causally to concrete losses.

The contribution need not be monocausal. Losses may be produced through class relations, markets, public policy, discrimination and institutional capacity at the same time. The purpose of the test is to identify what the access architecture itself contributes.

11. A Theoretical Interlude for the Reader: Questioning Encircled Agency

This article is not concerned only with external institutions. It also asks readers to consider the passages through which encircled agency may operate in their own lives.

This is not a clinical self-diagnosis, a standardised psychological scale or a universal hierarchy of victimhood. It does not measure a ‘Homovictimus identity’. Its purpose is to make visible the thresholds through which agency may be narrowed.

Life domain	Reflective question
Work and income	Can I change my work or working conditions without immediately endangering basic needs?
Housing and debt	To what extent do rent, credit, bills or debt determine the decisions I can make?
Care and health	How far do time, money, procedure and mobility determine access to care, health or rest?
Movement and transport	How fragile is my capacity to reach work, education, care or those close to me?
Law and applications	How real is my ability to understand, contest and change an administrative or legal decision?
Digital and financial infrastructures	To what extent do accounts, scores, payment systems, applications or platforms restrict my practical options?
Time	Am I able to plan my life, or am I trapped in renewal, waiting, resubmission and uncertainty?
Future and exit	Are changing work, place, education, relationships or ways of life materially possible, or do they carry prohibitive losses?

The purpose of these questions is not to quantify the degree to which a person occupies the Homovictimus position.

Encircled agency is not a fixed personality trait. It is the lived form of social conditioning distributed unevenly across the passages of life.

The intensity of encirclement is not evidence of individual failure. It indicates the points at which social determinism has become embedded in the infrastructures of everyday life.

12. Conclusion: The Subject Form of Institutionally Defined Insecurity

The Reality Paradigm analyses the architecture of social encirclement through the lived experience of Homovictimus.

Its decisive distinction is this:

Precarity refers to the insecure subject whose relation to rights and institutional protection is incomplete, fragile or uncertain. Homovictimus remains densely connected to institutions of rights, services, income, health, debt, mobility and recognition, yet remains unable to reach material security because these relations are conditional, procedural and operationally restrictive.

Accordingly:

Precarity is insecurity produced by fragile or insufficient institutional protection. Homovictimus is insecurity produced and administered through institutional definition, classification and procedural conditionality.

Homovictimus is more than a severe form of precarity. It is the subject form produced when insecurity is distributed through Onoptic thresholds that hold the person responsible while narrowing the practical field in which responsibility can be exercised.

The Onopticon is the architecture of this condition. Packaging Ontology converts persons, claims, products and experience into forms that institutions can process. Existential Blackmail converts material dependence into pressure towards compliance. The Fragopticon extends this dependency through delay, uncertainty and exhaustion.

Homovictimus is the human form of an age in which institutions that promise security increasingly condition the terms through which security may be reached.

The issue is not merely to identify isolated mechanisms. It is to render visible the architecture formed at the intersection of data, law, finance, property, care, access, platforms, time and material survival—and to ask under what conditions it narrows the reality within which people can live, act, refuse and become otherwise.

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