OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

The West Is Lost

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From the Enlightenment onward, progress functioned as the secular creed of the West. For centuries our societies were defined by the conviction that the future must outshine the present, just as the present surpassed the past. Such optimistic faith was not merely cultural or institutional but all-encompassing: Everything was going to get better. In this way of thinking, there was no room for loss.

Today, that civilizational belief is under profound threat. Loss has become a pervasive condition of life in Europe and America. It shapes the collective horizon more insistently than at any time since 1945, spilling into the mainstream of political, intellectual and everyday life. The question is no longer whether loss can be avoided but whether societies whose imagination is bound to "better" and "more" can learn to endure "less" and "worse." How that question is answered will shape the trajectory of the 21st century.

The most dramatic loss is environmental. Rising temperatures, extreme weather, disappearing habitats and the ruination of entire regions are eroding the conditions of life for humans and nonhumans alike. Even more threatening than present damage is the anticipation of future devastation — what has aptly been termed climate grief. What's more, mitigation strategies themselves promise losses: a departure from the consumer-oriented lifestyle of the 20th century, once celebrated as the hallmark of modern progress.

Economic changes have also brought loss. Entire regions once defined by prosperity — Rust Belt America, the coal fields of northern England, small-town France, eastern Germany — are now locked in decline. The optimism of the mid-20th century, when upward mobility seemed the natural way of things, has proved exceptional rather than typical. It was, it turns out, a historical interlude. Deindustrialization and global competition have fractured societies into winners and losers, with large segments of the middle class seeing their security erode.

Europe, meanwhile, has become an aging continent. Demographic developments have led to an ever-growing share of the population entering retirement age, while the proportion of younger cohorts continues to shrink. Along with a lost sense of buoyancy, old age confronts a large part of the population — and their families — with visceral experiences of loss. Some rural areas, suffering stark population decline, have become redoubts of the elderly.

Across Europe and America, public infrastructures have weakened. Education systems in the United States, the health service in Britain and transportation networks in Germany have all come under strain, fueling doubts about the capacity of liberal democracy to sustain itself. Housing shortages and grotesque price dynamics, particularly in metropolitan areas, produce acute insecurity and fears of downward mobility across much of the middle class.

And then there are the regressions of geopolitics. The post-Cold War expectation that liberal democracy and globalization would advance unchallenged has collapsed. Russia's war in Ukraine, China's authoritarian assertiveness and the retreat of multilateral institutions all signal the erosion of a liberal order once thought irreversible. A sense of historical reversal looms: instead of continuous democratization, a return of rivalry and violence. This too is experienced as loss, not of material goods but of confidence and security.

Loss, of course, is not new to modernity. Yet it sits uneasily with the modern ethos, which assumes dynamism and improvement. The modern secular religion of progress tends to excommunicate feelings of loss. Science, technology and capitalism all presume constant innovation and growth; liberal politics promise ever-greater well-being; middle-class life is built on expectations of rising living standards and expanding self-realization. The ideal of modern society is freedom from loss. This denial is Western modernity's foundational lie.

Yet such concealment has become impossible. Losses multiply and attract attention, while faith in progress falters. Once societies no longer believe that the future will inevitably be better, losses appear more severe. There is no guarantee that they are merely transitory episodes; soon, they begin to seem irreversible. This forms the basis of today's crisis. As the experience of loss contradicts the modern promise of never-ending progress, a general sense of grievance prevails.

Against this backdrop, the rise of right-wing populism makes sense. Populist politics, whether in Europe or America, appeals to fears of decline and promises restoration: "Take back control" or "Make America great again." Populism channels anger over what has disappeared but provides only illusions of recovery. The crucial question then becomes: How to deal with loss? Is there an alternative to both populist politics and the naïve belief in progress?

One answer is the politics of resilience. This strategy works from the assumption that while negative events cannot be avoided,

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relative protection is possible. The aim is to strengthen societies so they are less vulnerable — to fortify health systems, ensure global security, stabilize housing markets and defend the institutions of liberal democracy itself. A politics of resilience accepts losses but seeks to shield societies from at least some of them.

A second strategy is the revaluation of loss as potential gain. The idea has emerged, especially in ecological circles, that certain losses may liberate rather than impoverish. Was the fossil-fuel-driven lifestyle truly progress, or a dead end of destruction masquerading as advancement? Might its abandonment enable richer, less frenetic, more sustainable forms of life? Here progress is not rejected but redefined, transposed onto new coordinates of well-being and sustainability.

A third strategy concerns the relationship between winners and losers in Western societies. If economic and ecological losses accumulate primarily among certain groups — the poor, the less educated, the peripheral — while others remain insulated, profound problems arise. A redistribution of both gains and losses becomes, as a matter of justice, necessary. This is, at least to some extent, a political task.

Even so, resilience, redefinition and redistribution cannot abolish loss altogether. Industrial modernity and the homogeneous middle-class society of the 1950s and 1960s are gone for good. There is no return to a world before climate change, nor to the unipolar order of Western dominance in the 1990s.

There must then be a final strategy: acknowledgment and integration. Borrowing from psychotherapy, this approach insists that loss should neither be denied nor absolutized. Denial produces repression and resentment; fixation paralyzes. Integration means weaving loss into individual life stories and collective narratives, making it bearable without trivializing it.

For liberal democracy, the implications are decisive. If politics continues to promise endless improvement, it will fuel disillusionment and strengthen populisms that thrive on betrayed expectations. But if democracies learn to articulate a more ambivalent narrative — one that acknowledges loss, confronts vulnerability, redefines progress and pursues resilience — they may paradoxically renew themselves.

To face truth with open eyes, to accept fragility and to incorporate loss into the democratic imagination could, in fact, be the precondition of its vitality. If we once dreamed of abolishing loss, we must now learn how to live with it. Should we succeed, it would mark a step toward maturity. And that could become a deeper form of progress.

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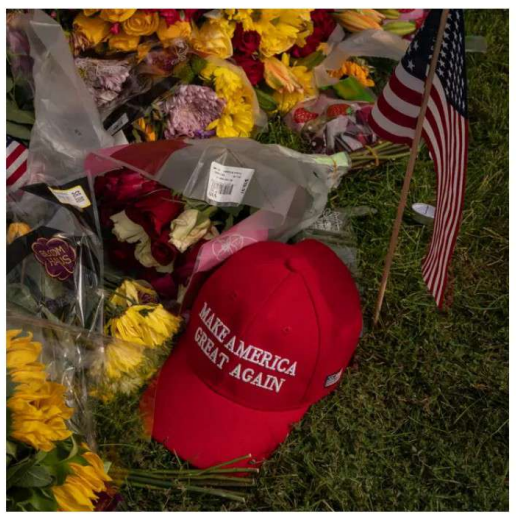

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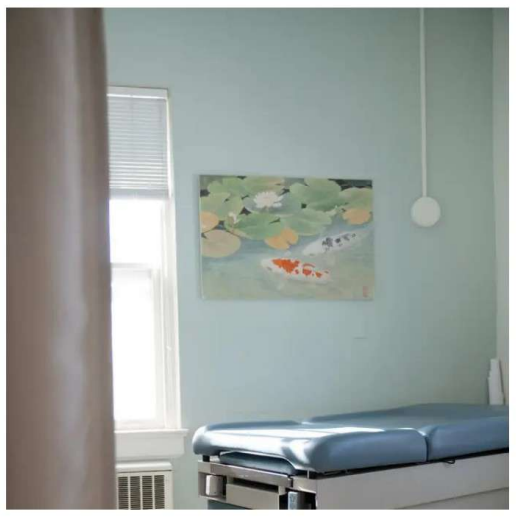

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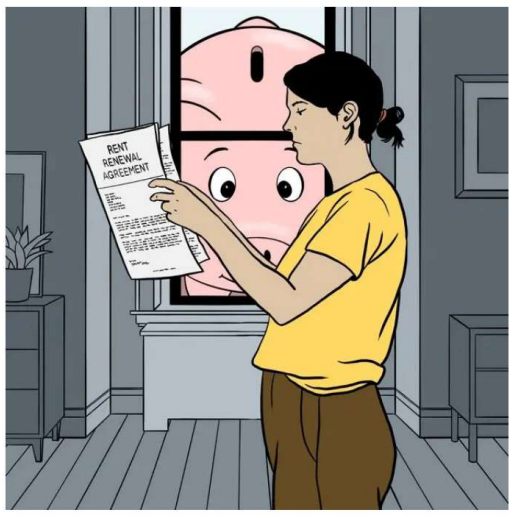

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