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Loss: A Modern Predicament

(Original German title: Verlust: Ein Grundproblem der Moderne)

463 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 13 October 2024

Sample translation by Joel Scott

pp. 9–21

The idealistic fable of the cunning of reason, through which the horror of the past is glossed over by means of the good end, blurts out the truth that blood and misery cling to the triumphs of society. The rest is ideology.
Max Horkheimer

Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.
Janis Joplin

Man suffers because he desires to possess and keep things that are transient by nature.
Siddhartha Gautama

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
Samuel Beckett

Introduction: Loss as a modern predicament

Tuvalu is sinking into the sea. The archipelago in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is losing part of its land mass every year. Its gradual disappearance and the displacement of its inhabitants is just one particularly vivid example of the damage that climate change is wreaking globally. Hurricane Katrina left behind it a trail of devastation in Louisiana in 2005, California is now regularly ravaged by forest fires, and India and Pakistan have been repeatedly hit by deadly heatwaves in recent years. The consequences of climatic shifts have now also reached Europe: in Spain and Italy, ever larger areas of land are being lost to agriculture, Ireland was hit by Hurricane Ophelia in 2017, and in Germany, flooding has caused considerable damage in recent years. Meanwhile, in the shadows of these spectacular disasters, we can observe a gradual, subtle process: the disappearance of ever more species of flora and fauna.

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In Germany, 84% of people are pessimistic about the future. That was the finding of a study carried out by the University of Bonn in 2022, which shows that the numbers of people who expect future generations to be materially worse off than the present generation have grown steadily in recent years. Of course, opinion polls should always be taken with a grain of salt. But it is remarkable how deeply entrenched negative expectations of the future of society have become in many Western countries since the 2010s. According to a study carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2023, 57% of people in the United States have a negative outlook when it comes to the future of their society. Expectations have also deteriorated across the board when it comes to confidence that liberal democracies will be able to find solutions to the problems facing society: according to a study by the Centre for the Future of Democracy in Cambridge, the majority of people in Western societies are losing faith in our political system.

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While a very small group of rich and super-rich individuals around the world are reaping huge profits and in the Global South, the bulk of populace – whose lives were previously characterised by poverty – have made moderate gains, the majority of people in Europe and North America are experiencing stagnating levels of prosperity. In comparison to this, the traditional middle class of the West has fallen behind: this is how Branko Milanovic has summarised the complex development of social inequality that has arisen around the world in recent decades. The label 'losers of modernisation' is but a rough shorthand for describing groups in Western societies who are wracked by status anxiety or have already dropped down the rungs of the social hierarchy. The new social inequality that has emerged with the end of the classic industrial society is also leaving its mark on socio-spatial, demographic, and even health-related aspects. Looking at regions such as eastern Germany, northern France, and the Midwest of the US, the consequences of deindustrialisation on social life are clear to see. The combination of low birth rates and internal emigration is leading to a gradual depopulation of rural areas in some parts of Europe. As a result of this new social inequality, life expectancy has fallen in some segments of the population in both the UK and the US. Which is not necessarily surprising, since today's education, housing, and labour markets are structured around the creation of winners and losers: with those who succeed on one side, and those who cannot keep up or fail entirely on the other.

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The armed conflict between Israel and Palestine, which escalated after the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas, left the public of the Western world shaken in late 2023. The armed conflict quickly turned into an interpretive conflict, which centred in no small part on how the events were to be historically 'contextualised'. Ultimately, the central question was: Which historical victims are 'more important' – the Jewish victims of the Shoah or the Palestinian victims of the Nakba? This fraught debate seems emblematic of a broader trend in which the losses, damage, traumas, and victims of the past are becoming the subjects of hotly contested political debates in the present. And the search for the 'perpetrators', those responsible for the damage, plays an important role in this. In the first decades of the 21st century, for example, the restitution of looted art – referring to artworks stolen by

European powers in their former colonies – has become a central concern for European cultural policy. The revelations around the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests is another topic causing heated global debate. Indigenous communities in Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia are demanding recognition for the suffering experienced by past generations. Overall, we can say that the culture of late modernity is one in which "historical wounds" (Chakarabarty) are the subject of public debate and the establishment of victim groups is politicised.

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"My grief will find you", "Vulnerability makes you strong", "Now I'm letting you go!" When you enter a bookshop in any major European city, the size of the psychology and self-help section is striking. Books on coping with grief, dealing with a separation, vulnerability, the pain and fear of loss and death are highly popular, and there is a huge range of titles on offer: How do I cope with the failure of a relationship or professional setbacks? What can give us comfort in the face of a cancer diagnosis or the death of a close relative? How do I cope with the ageing process? How do we best deal with our own vulnerability? Looking at such literature, it becomes clear that the individual in contemporary society has developed a special sensitivity to negative life events. This also applies to dealing with death. While death was viewed as an existential loss in classical modern thought and treated as a taboo, in the early 21st century, we can make out the beginnings of a new, more offensive culture of mourning emerging. This can be seen, for example, in the development of more individualised forms of funeral arrangements and disposal of remains, in palliative medicine, in grief counselling, in self-help groups for coping with grief, or forms of shared mourning in the digital realm.

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"Make America Great Again" – Donald Trump's election slogan sums up the thrust of the most powerful new development in today's political arena: right-wing populism. Populism is all about losses. Its voter base consists primarily of people who have experienced or fear a loss of status or power, and who perceive a more general trend of societal decline. The

populist promise is to regain that ideal past in which the people of yesteryear supposedly lived. At the same time, the ongoing stream of new fears of loss are only too welcome as far as populism is concerned – with populists constantly seeking to stir up new fields of fear with their rhetoric. Loss is the bread and butter of populism. As such, it is only the most prominent example of a broad political and cultural field of loss-orientated movements in late modernity, which also include the gilets jaunes protests originating in small towns in rural France, or 'incels', an international cohort of involuntarily celibate heterosexual men who complain that gains in gender equality have come at their expense. Meanwhile, the power of loss to support the formation of felt identities in the field of politics is not confined to the right; it can also be found among the liberal left. Because the stronger the right-wing populists become, the more the liberal left fears a permanent undermining of liberal democracy. It would seem that the overarching slogan of political debate in contemporary society can be summed up with the question: 'Whose losses? Mine or yours?'

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Vinyl records are booming. Once hopelessly antiquated and made obsolete by CDs and streaming services, they're now valued for the authentic listening experience they offer. 'Just like in the old days' – days the listener may have never experienced themselves – collectors hold the elaborately designed sleeves in their hands and listen to the crackling as the needle glides over the grooves of the record. At the same time, 'lost places' have become an insider tip in urban tourism: decaying, dilapidated buildings from the past, often from the industrial era and located on the outskirts of the city, offering a special 'ruin aesthetic'. But carefully restored buildings such as Tacheles in Berlin or the Bourse de Commerce in Paris also evoke the fascination of a more recent past, while the heritage-listed 19th-century buildings in the major cities of Europe and North America enjoy great popularity as residential real estate. They are all examples of a late-modern nostalgic economy and aesthetics that seek to keep a certain image of the past present in the materiality of things and places. When the future no longer holds much promise, protecting the culture of the past from total loss – as heritage, retro aesthetics, or simply as nostalgia – has become a typical strategy of contemporary culture.

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The COVID-19 pandemic – which had the world in its grip from 2020 to 2022 and left millions of victims in its wake – has left indelible marks on society. One of the most significant consequences has been the establishment of the notion of resilience as a model of social and political governance. And with immediate application: the basic idea is that in order to arm itself against future, inevitable pandemics, society must develop resilient structures through targeted institutional precautions, and not just in the healthcare system. However, the notion of resilience has gained popularity far beyond the confines of healthcare. It is viewed as a key element, for example, in schemes for mitigating the vulnerability of individuals, and as a guiding principle for a society seeking to insulate itself from local crises by diversifying supply chains within a globalised economy, and also in efforts to prevent democratic regression by shoring up our political institutions and public spheres. Whereas classical, planning-based models of governance optimistically set positive targets for the future, the resilience-based models of the 21st century are founded on scepticism. They no longer seek to perfect living conditions, but to stave off the worst-case scenario.

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Eight scenes – eight different contemporary social phenomena which, despite all their differences, have one thing in common: they revolve around various forms of loss. Together, they form – to quote the author Judith Schalansky – an “inventory of losses”. Loss has come to occupy a central position in late modernity – whether in the consequences of climate change or the entrenchment of negative expectations about the future, the ‘losers’ of post-industrial modernisation or the collective processing of ‘historical wounds’ and of who is acknowledged as the victims and perpetrators of these crimes, in a heightened psychological awareness of vulnerability, in political populism, a nostalgia for things past, or programmes of resilience. Each of these fields will be dealt with in more detail over the course of this book. In all of them, we find losses or experiences of loss in the present, anticipations of future losses, or commemorations of

things past that have since been lost, as well as political and cultural programmes that seek to respond to experiences of loss, either to transform them or to attempt to prevent them. Despite all their diversity, these phenomena are united by their underlying connection to the notion of loss. Which poses the question: What is going on here? Why are such different types of loss gaining prominence in contemporary society, and how are they interrelated? What is at the heart of this late-modern proliferation of loss?

This is the initial question that this book sets out to answer. It is a question that emerges from the specific historical moment in which we find ourselves today, in the third decade of the 21st century. However, the book also goes beyond this question. If we want to understand why these forms of loss have become so explosive in contemporary society, we need to take a step back and broaden our perspective. Rather than remaining entangled in the phenomena of the immediate present – and thus all too easily getting bogged down in current affairs – we need to look at modern Western society as a whole, at its evolution in Europe and North America since the 18th century. In order to understand the present, it is important to establish this theoretical and historical depth of field with regard to 'modernity'. As such, the central questions that this book seeks to answer are: What is the overarching relationship between Western modernity and loss? What does modern society 'do' with experiences of loss? It is only within this framework that we can address the ensuing question of how the function of loss has changed in the present, and identify the special role played by experiences of loss in late modernity.

In the interest of avoiding misunderstandings, I would like to make it clear that this book aims to deliver a sober analysis of the relationship between modern society and experiences of loss. I have no interest in nourishing a mood of cultural pessimism or throwing oil on the fire of dramatic prognosticators who identify losses left and right, fixating upon them with indignation, excitement, or resignation. I can assuage the concerns of anybody fearing such a work of cultural pessimism. And those who might be hoping for such a book will likewise be sorely disappointed. It is perhaps worth pointing this out, because when the public discourse over the past decade and a half has spoken repeatedly of losses, about all the things that have (allegedly) gotten worse in recent years or will continue to get worse in the future, the horsemen of the apocalypse are never far away. The practice of *doomscrolling* our way through the digital world represents the epitome of such a negative spiral of attention. Regardless of whether we are in the digital or analogue

realm, we quickly find ourselves on the slippery slope towards an endless array of doom-and-gloom scenarios. They often lead to despondency and despair, and some people even cultivate them out of a sinister desire for societal demise, which others then exploit for political gain.

However, the flipside of this negativism is a stance that is just as detrimental to understanding: that of dismissing and downplaying the trends. This too is a familiar response: people don't want to hear (anymore) about these losses, they would prefer to just block them out. Losses are an unpleasant and sometimes embarrassing topic – this also applies to personal losses, death, serious illness, and personal failures – which people often choose to keep silent about. People who do decide to speak openly about their losses are often seen as wet blankets: 'Why are you always so negative, where's your positivity?' The tendency to dismiss losses goes hand in hand with that of downplaying them: sure, there may well be some losses, but they pale in comparison to the many gains of modernity, and often they are based on 'feelings', and sometime are entirely 'imagined'. And what's more, they represent only a temporary, incidental blip in the unwavering advance of social and personal development, in keeping with the notion that "everything will be okay in the end, and if it's not okay now, then it's not the end".

Negativism and dismissal or downplaying are complementary subterfuges that prevent us from developing an objective understanding of the fundamental, complex problem that losses represent for Western modernity. Negativism and dismissal both need to be overcome in order to deliver a sufficient analysis of the situation – in this respect, the 'socioanalysis' of sociology is no different from psychoanalysis. However, these two attitudes – with which we are familiar from media, political, and personal discourse – do not come out of nowhere. For if you consult the intellectual discourse of modernity in the hope of finding an analytical framework for understanding the problem of loss, you are to come up more or less empty-handed. Rather, we find two perspectives that bear a close resemblance to the everyday attitudes mentioned above: either the losses are pushed to the periphery of the field of vision in an analysis viewed through the lens of an optimistic philosophy of history, or the focus is placed on them entirely as part of a cultural-critical approach that seeks to deliver an overarching intellectual reckoning with modernity.

It is interesting to note that you will search in vain for an entry on the term 'loss' (*Verlust*) in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, the historical lexicon that traces the shifts in

politico-social semantics in German since the 18th century.[1] With the decisive historical turning point ushered in by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, democratic movements, and the Industrial Revolution, a new semantics informed by the philosophy of history became dominant, laying the theoretical foundations for an optimistic perspective on the future. The use of the concept of progress and other movement-related concepts – such as 'development', 'revolution', and *Geschichte*[2] (history) – to refer to the history of humankind became established during the phase from 1750 to 1850 that Reinhart Koselleck calls the *Sattelzeit*.[3] These future-oriented, movement-related concepts became guiding principles in Western modernity. Conversely, this dominant progress-focussed perspective obscures a view of what has been lost or is in danger of being lost in the process of modernisation (or in spite of it); directing our attention away from individual and collective experiences of loss. At best, they are filed away as collateral damage. But it seems that the project of Western modernity has no interest in dwelling on these losses.

The observation that loss is not an established concept in the mainstream thought of modernity is supported by the fact that sociology, as a scholarly discipline for analysing modern society, has not yet developed a systematic sociology of loss. Only the book *Loss and Change,* written in 1974 by the British development sociologist Peter Marris, attempted to sketch out an alternative path.[4] Marris fleshed out the extent to which the profound social changes of modernity were repeatedly accompanied and influenced by experiences of loss for different social groups. To be sure, his illuminating study has had little effect on the field of social science. This might come as a surprise at first, but it shouldn't: after all, sociology has long been shaped by the paradigm of modernisation, which follows in the footsteps of the model of progress set out by the philosophy of history and views Western modernity as the end of history. While it is true that the critical strand of sociology never tires of pointing out the pathologies and crises of the process of modernisation, the dominant line of thought does not depart from the assumption that the individual actors have lost something that was important to them through these crises, but rather that the development has not yet progressed *far enough.* The critical-sociological

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[1] Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols., Stuttgart 1972-1997.
[2] Deriving from the word *geschehen*, or happening, whose root comes from the word *to spring, to emerge*. – Trans.
[3] Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt/M. 1988.
[4] Peter Marris, *Loss and Change*, London 1974/1986.

gaze is therefore usually focussed on a *lack of* progress, not on a lack suffered *as a result of* progress or a lack that exists *despite* progress. As such, sociology as a discipline has largely stood on the side of modernisation.

This is one side of things. On the other, we could hardly claim that the theme of loss is glaringly absent from the intellectual discourse on modernity. From the 18th century onwards, we can note a number of prominent diagnoses of loss running alongside the rise of the notion of progress, almost competing with it, as it were. In his *Discourse on Inequality,* Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced a topos of loss containing an inherent critique of the Enlightenment with his assumption that in early modern society, humanity was becoming alienated from its natural state, which proved to be influential for the development of modern theories of alienation.[5] At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, two influential sociologists, Max Weber and Georg Simmel, sketched out highly nuanced accounts of the losses that had accompanied the course of modernity: Weber elaborates upon the disenchantment that he believes goes hand in hand with the processes of rationalisation and secularisation; while Simmel puts forward the notion of a 'tragedy of culture', arguing that in modern society, the individual loses the ability to absorb the complexity of 'objective culture'. The intellectual diagnoses of loss continued in the 20th century, at the height of the philosophies of modernity: ranging from Walter Benjamin's thesis regarding a "loss of aura" through the technological reproducibility of mass culture to Georg Lukács's assumption of a transcendental homelessness in modernity and Martin Heidegger's ontology of the forgetfulness of being.[6] But we also come across diagnoses with somewhat more modest claims that lament the "loss" or "disappearance" of this or that in their very title: Richard Sennett, for example, points to the *Fall of Public Man* within the "tyranny of intimacy", and in his *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre identifies a loss of virtue in the modern era.[7]

This is the dichotomy that one encounters with respect to the significance of experiences of loss in intellectual discourse: on the one hand, there is a conspicuous repression of loss within the framework of a political and scholarly conception of

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[5] Jean-Jaques Rousseau, "Discourse on Inequality" [1755], Stuttgart 2008.
[6] On the philosophical history of the thematisation of loss in all its subtlety, see Ludger Heidbrink, *Melancholie und Moderne: Zur Kritik der historischen Verzweiflung*, Munich 1994.
[7] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York, 1977; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1984.

modernisation and progress, whereby we remain "tragically blind" to experiences of loss.[8] Within the framework of narratives of progress informed by the philosophy of history, it would seem that, however slowly, "the problem ... of suffering is being resolved by its gradual elimination".[9] On the other hand, there is a lively discourse within cultural criticism that laments or dissects a number of utterly fundamental things that are lost in modernity from the perspective of the critical observer – be it meaning, community, or individuality in mass society, or the very belief in our capacity to actively influence the course of history. Some of these cultural critiques are highly lucid, while others tend to absolutise their viewpoint.

Philosophy of history or cultural critique – these are the two fundamental perspectives that modern thinking seems to offer us with respect to loss. While modernisation theories view experiences of loss at most as a side effect of progress or as a rearguard action against its advance, cultural critique is marked by the perspective of the intellectual interpreter, who identifies a fundamental 'loss of' this or that. The analysis I undertake in this book distances itself from both approaches. Neither modernisation theory nor cultural critique can provide an adequate foundatoin for a sociological understanding of the relationship between modern society and loss. Indeed, the philosophy of history and cultural critique are themselves – each in their own way – formative phenomena *within* modern society's relation to loss, which must be scrutinised *from without*, through the lens of social theory.

In order to develop such an analysis of the function of loss within modern society, however, we cannot avoid the question that precedes it: What is a loss? Can it be defined in general terms despite the diversity of all the things that can be lost? I will deal with this fundamental question in more detail in the first section of this book. Generally speaking, we can say that losses need to be experienced as such by subjects. They are always *experiences* of loss. To put it somewhat simply: in the experience of loss, the fact that something disappears is evaluated negatively. The disappearance is bemoaned and often triggers strong emotions. Many things can be experienced as a loss – death or destruction, a loss of status or the loss of a homeland, a loss of control or a loss of positive expectations for the future, for example – but the following always applies: you can only perceive

[8] Marris, *Loss and Change,* p. 84.
[9] Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Stuttgart 2004 (1949/1953), p. 13.

something as a loss if that which is lost previously seemed subjectively or collectively valuable, was essential to a sense of identity, and was the object of an emotional attachment. On closer inspection, we see that losses are highly complex phenomena, not only from a psychological perspective, but also from a sociological one. Losses contain a specific relationship with the past by way of memories, and a relationship with the future by way of expectations. If losses are contingent upon their perception as such, they are closely related to social interpretive frameworks, and to discourses and narratives that negotiate losses. The range of emotions associated with loss is broad and extends from grief, shame, and fear to anger, indignation, and bitterness. However, experiences of loss are processed through social practices – from mourning rituals to forms of legal compensation – and they often become the subject of fierce controversies in various social arenas, defining what is socially recognised as a loss and what is not.

Understood in this way, there can be no doubt that losses have always existed. In the terms of existential philosophy, we can say that they are a part of human existence. The confrontation with mortality and death, with the ultimate, existential loss, makes this experience unavoidable for every human being. It is also evident that, from a comparative, historical perspective, experiences of loss can be found in all forms of human society. The unpredictability of nature and the Earth, including natural and climatic disasters at the extreme; diseases and epidemics; the consequences of violent conflicts and war; or the question of how communities deal with death – these are all situations that have challenged all societal forms throughout history. They can be found in hunter-gatherer societies and in early civilisations, in European antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the early modern period. In the history of societies and cultures, losses have been dealt with in very different ways: through elaborate rites of passage or religious worldviews, by embedding them in an understanding of the succession of generations or viewing them as tragic strokes of fate, or by accepting them as an element of the transience of life or seeing them as an affront that calls for revenge.

So what is different in the modern age? What sets modernity apart is not the experiences of loss themselves nor that there was a sudden explosion of them or, conversely, a marked decline. Rather, what is special is the *relationship* that modern Western society has with loss. To put it pointedly: modernity has a deep-seated problem with experiences of loss. Loss is a fundamental predicament for modernity. What does that

mean? Why is that the case? And what are the consequences of this? This is the subject that will occupy us in the second, main part of this book.

My underlying thesis is that modernity necessarily has a fundamental problem with experiences of loss because they contradict the modern belief in progress. That there is a fundamental *contradiction between progress and loss* that is built into modernity, between the belief in progress and the reality of experiences of loss. This makes the status of loss in modernity fundamentally precarious. Since the 18th century, with industrialisation and the increasing importance of science, the market, secularism and democracy in Europe and North America, modern society has developed a series of structures, whose late-modern incarnations we are still living under today. However, in order to understand why this form of society has a fundamental problem with experiences of loss, we need to identify what forms the innermost driving force of this society. Namely, an orientation towards *progress*. Regardless of how we understand 'progress' and whether we are convinced that it is actually taking place – modern society acquires its particular form and dynamism from its *belief* in progress, which permeates all areas of society, from technology to politics, from the economy to everyday culture. Technological innovation, economic growth, improved living conditions, increased freedoms, successful self-realisation – in various guises, progress serves as the objective of the imperative that drives modern institutions and ways of life. The belief in progress assumes that the future will be *better* for society and for the individual than the present, just as the present is already *better* than the past. In all its grandiose simplicity, this belief in improvement, with its future-orientated model of time, provides the basic formula of modernity, which gives it its initial dynamism. Modernity is based on an unprecendented assumption of a fundamental break between the experience of the past and the expectations of the future: the future will be completely different from the past – and not just different, but qualitatively better. Progress is thus more than just a vague hope for modernity, it forms the centre of a social imperative that is based on a 'forwards' and 'upwards' as a fixed expectation, norm, and promise.

However, the consequences of this are unavoidable: the promise of progress is constantly thwarted by loss – whether experienced by individuals or social groups. Because no matter what is lost, an experience of loss is always an experience of *deterioration*. For the person who has lost something, the present is not experienced as *better* than the past, but as *worse*. Or in the case of somebody anticipating a loss: the future

will be seen as a fundamental deterioration when compared with the present. If we experience a painful loss, then it becomes palpably clear that the present or future *lacks* something decisive that existed in the past – whether it is an elementary facet of life and physical health, social status or organised structures, a homeland or our capacity to have faith in the future. Losses may have always been subjectively difficult, but in a modern society with an entrenched belief that the normal course of things is one of progress, which can only lead to things getting better, experiences of loss in which something important gets worse must represent a fundamental disappointment, or even a scandal. The reality of negative experiences does not fit into the "antitragic ... programme of modernity".[10] In the extreme, we could describe this viewpoint with the slogan that the optimistic followers of Henri de Saint-Simon wrote on their banners: "Tomorrow we will begin a new life, the fanfares will ring out; and we will have no reason to mourn anymore."[11] As such, the modern belief in progress has no place for negativity and mourning for what has been lost, for what has failed or collapsed.

[10] Albrecht Koschorke, *Hegel and us,* Berlin 2015, p. 86.
[11] Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin, "Notices Historiques" [1832], in: François Barthélemy Arlès-Dufour et al. (eds.), *Œuvres de Saint Simon et d'Enfantin. Volume 6*, Aalen 1963 (reprint), p. 11.