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e-Newsletter | November 2025 | Monthly Issue - 100

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Dear Reader,

We open with **Stephen Johnson** who poses the question on most minds, did AI flop at work? It depends on who you ask…, he answers. A recent report has found, he writes, that 95% of organizations that have integrated generative AI into their operations have seen "zero return." It's early days yet, he feels, and cites "agentic AI" as the development that tips the scales, leaving it to Ross Pomeroy to do a deep dive into this subject in the lengthy, 15 minutes read, but hugely informative piece that follows.

Ross Pomeroy admits that AI adoption rates look weak, but wonders whether the data hides a bigger story. Behind the plateau in corporate AI lies a surge in personal and agentic use, he says, dismissing the notion that AI could be in a bubble. While it's true that despite $30-40 billion in enterprise investment into GenAI, 95% of organizations researched are getting zero return according to an MIT NANDA report, it is a temporary blip, and AI is already transforming the way people work and is set to overhaul how businesses operate.

Jonny Thomson tackles the sci-fi hypothesis that explains why you click with certain people. You may actually be on the same wavelength, he write, and introduces us to the term homophily, meaning that people like people who are like them. It implies similar brain structures and functions that help getting people onto the same wavelength. Interbrain synchrony is another curious term used to support things like teamwork, less stilted chat and more flow. He talks about the feeling of a great connection which is an invisible biological dance, face to face, holding eye contact, and sharing a concrete task or story. Wow.

Back-of-the-book in our regularly scheduled column **Top-of-Mind** we deep dive into Prof. Andreas Reckwitz's book "Loss: A modern predicament" in which we face foundational questions like was the fossil fuel driven industrial revolution lifestyle truly progress, or a dead end of destruction masquerading as advancement? Is de-growth really the new delight? Is it possible to reinvent loss and see it as gain? Pause and ponder ☺

Explore JJ's curated articles for expert insights on emerging trends, managing people, business, and personal growth. Gain valuable knowledge and prepare for future challenges with confidence.

INSIDE:

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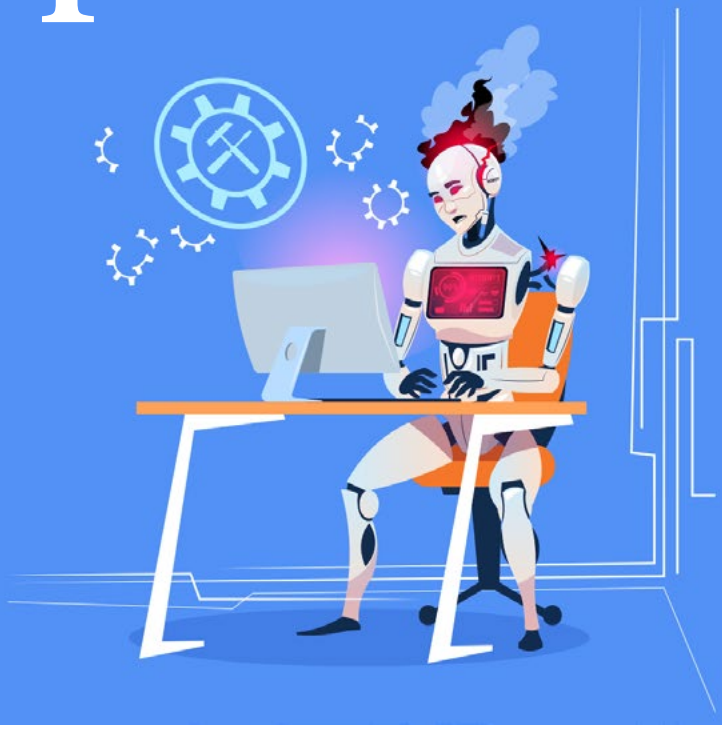
Did AI flop at work?

Depends on who you ask…



Stephen Johnson | 4 min read

Hey Big Thinkers,

In October 2021, I wrote an article for Big Think about AI that ended with a summary of AI experts' predictions about when humanity would create artificial general intelligence (AGI) — systems capable of understanding, learning, and performing almost any intellectual task that humans can. The surveys varied, but one put the average prediction around 2100.

That article is, to put it mildly, outdated. In the wake of rapid AI advancement, most experts now believe AGI will emerge within the next 15 years, with some claiming it'll come this decade. "If you say you don't think AGI is going to arrive until 2040, you are seen as like a hyper conservative, basically Luddite, in Silicon Valley," as Andy Mills and Matt Boll put it on their new podcast, The Last Invention.

Now, some cold water: A recent report found that 95% of organizations that have integrated generative AI into their operations have seen "zero return." This obviously doesn't mean today's models are useless, or that there aren't worthwhile applications for AI outside of business. Still, it's not easy for me to square this finding with grand predictions about AGI — a technology that would ostensibly emerge from scaling up the types of systems we have today.

Are businesses lagging behind? Will it be "agentic AI" that tips the scales? Are these reports failing to capture all the ways that businesses and individual employees are using these tools?

The answer may very well be "yes" to all three questions, as Ross Pomeroy explores this week.

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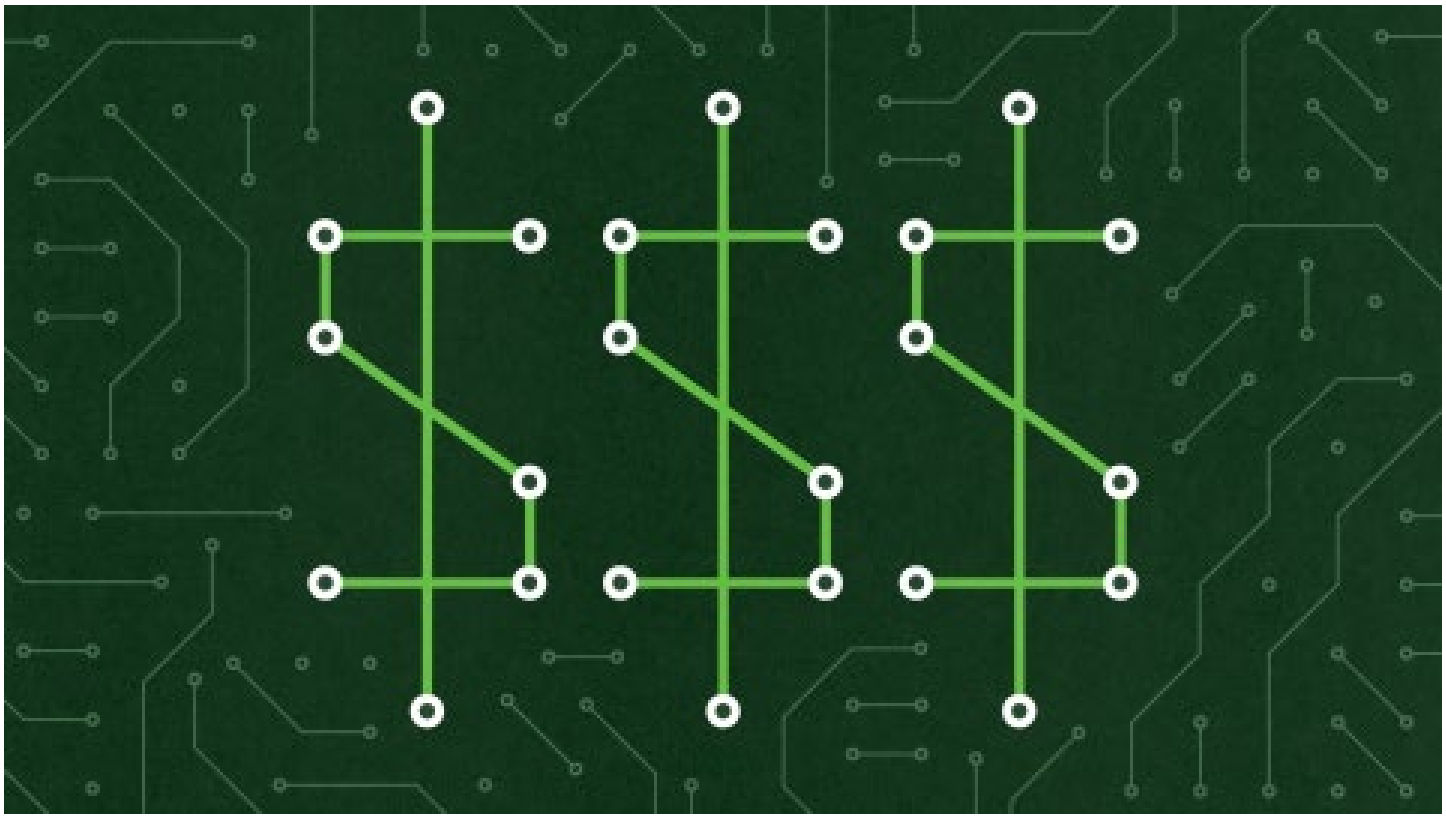
AI adoption rates look weak — but the data hides a bigger story

Behind the plateau in corporate AI lies a surge in personal and agentic use.



Credit: eriksvoboda / Adobe Stock / Sarah Soryal

Ross Pomeroy | 15 min read

Is AI in a bubble?

That's the basic yet seismic question on a lot of people's minds. But here's the thing: It's oversimplified, attempting to color an unprecedentedly gray moment either black or white. And what does the query even mean? If you're asking about whether or not the valuations of certain AI startups and the companies that supply them are overvalued relative to their current financials, there's a strong case for answering in the affirmative. If you're asking whether the hype over AI has raced ahead of the technological landscape in regards to it attaining artificial general intelligence or rapidly destroying the labor market — the answer might be "probably."

But if you're asking whether AI will ultimately fizzle out and go down in history as the fever dream of a science-fiction-obsessed Silicon Valley cult, willed into existence by billions of FOMO-fueled venture capital dollars, the answer is undeniably "no."

Where is AI adoption, anyway?

Perhaps the best data available to help us answer any form of the omnipresent "bubble" question is AI adoption rates. Are individuals and businesses actually using AI? Are they deriving benefits? Are they integrating it into what they do each day?

Let's look at businesses first. QuantumBlack, McKinsey's AI arm, published a report in June showing that 8 in 10 companies use generative AI — so the technology seems to be catching on pretty quickly.

However, an MIT NANDA report made public two months later appeared to reaffirm skeptics' canary calls. The researchers analyzed 300 publicly disclosed AI initiatives at various companies, interviewed representatives from 52 organizations, and surveyed 153 senior leaders at major industry conferences.

"Despite $30-40 billion in enterprise investment into GenAI, this report uncovers a surprising result in that 95% of organizations are getting zero return," the authors reported.

That headline-friendly finding spread quickly, trumpeted by a range of media sources as evidence that the presumed AI bubble is about to burst. The previously published QuantumBlack report also indicated that AI had a similarly lackluster effect on companies' bottom lines, though it failed to generate buzz at the time.

Moreover, starting in June, companies of all sizes reduced their use of AI, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Both the MIT researchers and QuantumBlack analysts would say that this is a temporary blip, however. Given how the media widely covered their reports, one might think they hold negative views of AI's practicality in the business world, but the opposite is true. In reality, both teams gushed that AI is already transforming the way people work and is set to overhaul how businesses operate.

"For the first time in human history, you can manipulate technology with human language, not a computer science language," Alexander Sukharevsky, a Senior Partner at McKinsey and the global leader of QuantumBlack, told Big Think in an interview. "It's always hard to predict the future," he cautioned, adding: "If I look at the current adoption and willingness of organizations to go for a transformation, it's the highest ever in my career."

Two trends help fuel Sukharevsky's and the MIT team's optimism over AI. The first is that while most enterprises haven't derived tangible advantages from adopting AI just yet, individuals have.

An AI "shadow economy" at the workplace

"As of late 2024, nearly 40 percent of the U.S. population aged 18-64 uses generative AI," a trio of economists reported earlier this year. "Twenty-three percent of employed respondents had used generative AI for work at least once in the previous week, and 9 percent used it every work day."

If those statistics don't seem groundbreaking at face value, consider them in a historical context.

"Relative to each technology's first mass-market product launch, work adoption of generative AI has been as fast as the personal computer (PC), and overall adoption has been faster than either PCs or the internet," the authors noted. Granted, PCs and the internet were harder to initially embrace due to cost and difficulty of setup, but AI adoption is right in line with two pivotal products of our current technological era, evincing its long-term transformative potential.

The MIT team witnessed this firsthand while researching their report. Though AI initiatives floundered at the business level, AI itself was widely used among the workforce.

"AI is already transforming work, just not through official channels. Our research uncovered a thriving 'shadow AI economy' where employees use personal ChatGPT accounts, Claude subscriptions, and other consumer tools to automate significant portions of their jobs, often without IT knowledge or approval.

The scale is remarkable. While only 40% of companies say they purchased an official LLM subscription, workers from over 90% of the companies we surveyed reported regular use of personal AI tools for work tasks. In fact, almost every single person used an LLM in some form for their work."

These employees had a solid grasp of what it would

take for AI to succeed at a grander, enterprise-wide scale: learning and memory. AI must be able to retain information over extended periods of time and adapt to changing circumstances. Which brings us to the second reason that both the MIT and QuantumBlack teams are certain of AI's integral future in business despite its tepid success so far: AI systems with those abilities are here and are now starting to be rolled out.

Unleash the agents

The overwhelming majority of AI systems used in businesses today are easy-to-implement, shareholder-friendly chatbots. But while these might slightly improve productivity at the worker level — summarizing meetings, making images, or writing emails — they aren't going to deliver the revolutionary change to workflows that drives major returns on investment.

Chatbots are primarily conversational tools designed to answer questions from a predefined knowledge base. AI agents, on the other hand, are sophisticated, autonomous systems that can analyze information, make decisions, and take actions to achieve goals. Fundamentally, chatbots are reactive, whereas AI agents are proactive. A chatbot is like a calculator — essentially a tool. An agent is a collaborator with a calculator of its own.

"Think about an infinite army of interns that is able to do a lot of simple tasks," Sukharevsky said of agentic AI. "But you need to orchestrate them, you need to upskill them, you need to provide them with the right information.

Agents are in the early stages of implementation, and these have the potential to deliver on the grander promise of AI.

"Don't expect the first time to see a masterpiece," Sukharevsky said. "But it actually evolves. What we see today is the worst … If you look at the technology a year ago, two years ago, and if you look at the technology today, or twelve months down the road, you get completely different outcomes."

Agentic AI's rapid progression evinces its shift toward widespread, practical use in enterprises. The MIT researchers found more evidence for this trend.

"In the next few quarters, several enterprises will lock in vendor relationships that will be nearly impossible to unwind," they wrote.

The consulting firm Source echoed what the researchers were seeing in a trend report published in mid-September. Some 55% of its clients planned to invest in organizational restructuring during the next 18 months, almost entirely due to AI.

"It is impossible to hide from the impact of AI," the authors wrote. "Few organisations—if any—do not have a roadmap for AI implementation."

What might agentic AI look like when integrated into a business? QuantumBlack analysts provided a few examples. In e-commerce, agents could observe a user's behavior, shopping cart content, and purchase history to offer product recommendations in real time. In supply chain management, agents synced to internal and external data sources could continuously forecast demand, allocate stock, determine optimal transport, and more. At a retail bank, agents could formulate credit-risk memos on prospective clients, a task that can currently take a human worker two to four days to complete. Instead, that person can check over the AI's work and then make the loan decision.

What about us?

If AI agents are essentially digital workers, and you can create a ton of them, where does that leave human workers?

The broader topic of job loss in the era of AI is widely covered, heavily debated, and nearly impossible to predict in the long term. The only thing we can say for sure is that the nature of work is going to change.

The MIT researchers did hear about some workforce effects directly from company leaders.

"Organizations that have crossed the GenAI Divide are beginning to see selective workforce impacts in customer support, software engineering, and administrative functions … Executives were hesitant to reveal the scope of layoffs due to AI but it was between 5-20% of customer support operations and administrative processing work in these companies."

The researchers also asked workers in these companies for their opinions.

"Concerns about workforce impact were far less common than anticipated. Most users welcomed automation, especially for tedious, manual tasks, as long as data remained secure and outcomes were measurable."

Sukharevsky briefly described the role of a human worker in an agentic AI future.

"Your role is to find the right team members, the right skills, the right data, and to put them against the right mission. If you invest enough time, that [AI] intern all of a sudden becomes an expert one day — your peer — and it can add a lot more value."

Effects of the continuing AI rollout will not be felt equally in all sectors, the MIT team learned. In healthcare, energy, and advanced industry, executives didn't anticipate any hiring reductions over the next five years. In technology and media, however — where AI is coding, producing images, writing scripts, and crafting video — staff reductions are underway now and more are expected in the near future.

But new jobs and industries will spring up thanks to agents, Sukharevsky said. He's already seeing it.

"Newcomers are creating completely new business models that you couldn't imagine in the past, and you couldn't imagine them because the unit economics couldn't fly, now they finally fly."

Sukharevsky stressed that it will take years before agentic AI is incorporated into large, established businesses. Legacy software architecture, human perception, management, and governance are all barriers to successful adoption.

"You're seeing mixed results because you need to go 'all-in' to get the outcome. It's difficult, it's expensive, and it's not immediate."

But it is definitely coming. QuantumBlack offers some prebuilt agents and a builder software product for companies to create their own.

"What we're trying to do is close the gap between the promise of AI and the reality," Sukharevsky said. "We already have a few dozen agentic transformations under the belt and ongoing, so this is real."

The answers we seek

Humans generally aren't hardwired for patience. When faced with uncertain circumstances, we grasp for certainty. After the MIT team published their report, many onlookers grasped onto the notion that AI wasn't yielding financial results; thus the anxiety-inducing structural change to work and life that AI represents might never materialize. But delving deeper into the report and reading others like it makes clear that AI's broad effects are only beginning to manifest.

Change is undeniably afoot. AI's rise is often compared to the Industrial Revolution. Whether AI will actually result in comparable societal upheaval and economic reorganization is anybody's guess. The only certainty is that we won't get the answers we seek in a single report, from the latest adoption data, or even over a matter of months or years. The Industrial Revolution played out over eight decades. Even if the AI economic transformation plays out four times faster, we still have a long ride to go■

Source:

https://bigthink.com/the-present/ai-adoption-rates-look-weak-but-current-data-hides-a-bigger-story/

The sci-fi hypothesis that explains why you click with certain people

You may actually be on the same wavelength.

Jonny Thomson | 07 min read

Not all conversations are the same.

Sometimes, you can be talking to someone for hours, and it feels like only a few minutes. You natter and natter without ever having to think of what to say or cringe through any awkward silence. There's a gentle sway to things — you listen, they speak, they listen, you speak. The chat dances to the easy and comfortable rhythm of the conversational tide.

At other times, a conversation can feel like medieval torture. One-word answers litter the path toward your desperate, fumbling attempt to get away. You've already used the toilet excuse, you've got a full drink, so you're stuck in your chatless hell with Captain Boring.

"So, how often do you feed your dog?" you ask.

"It depends."

Silence.

In this week's Mini Philosophy interview, the neuroscientist Ben Rein takes us inside the brain of a good conversation. And what he has to say gives a whole new weight to the expression, "We're on the same wavelength."

Nice to meet your brain

There is nothing concrete about human psychology. As a discipline, psychology suffers a replication crisis, and even when it comes to "pretty certain" things, there are likely to be several million exceptions at either end of the bell curve. Neuroscience is a bit better. Biology deals with

data and observable phenomena, but here the problem is one of complexity. There's just too much going on to say this or that has to be the case.

Social psychology is no different. A lot of the "why" behind a good conversation is lost in the untrackable murk of our environment. Maybe your parents taught you a lot about David Bowie, your friends taught you to enjoy Pokémon cards, and too many late hours on Reddit taught you about Doomsday prepping. And so, when you spend ten minutes rattling off the first-generation Pokémon evolutions to someone in a Ziggy Stardust outfit and with a homesteader's calloused hands, you're surprised how easy the conversation went.

But, as with everything, it's not all about our environment. Our genetics, and especially our brain, might have something to say. This is what Rein taught me:

"Research shows that people who are better friends show more similar brain structures in these social brain areas. And so, it's possible — and this is called homophily — that people like people who are like them. It's this idea of 'self-other overlap.' So it's probably a stretch to say definitely, but it's possible that when we meet people we are really connecting with, and when it's just a great relationship, we have similar brain structures. And, you know, if you have similar brain functions, that may kind of help us get onto the same wavelength."

Interbrain connectivity

So, if you really get on with someone, it might be that you have similar-looking or similar-working brains. The next time you find yourself laughing and enjoying someone's company, pause to say, "Hey, I like how your brain works."

Rein admits that this kind of homophily is an educated speculation at the moment — we don't have enough data to prove the point conclusively. But we do have more data to point out something else he taught me, and that's about how our brains will tend to behave similarly to others we're bonding with. As Rein put it:

"There's also something else called interbrain synchrony, which is just unbelievable. It sounds like a sci-fi thing, and it is what it sounds like. It's that when two people are interacting or working together or sharing an experience, their brain activity can synchronize, and not in the way of telephone wires sprouting from our heads. There's no signal that's synchronizing; it's not like that.

But if you were to have those two people in a brain scanner at the same time, they would be showing nearly identical patterns of brain activity in that moment. And this interbrain synchrony — which only occurs in certain brain areas, not the whole brain — seems to support things like teamwork. So it's possible that when you get on with someone, you're literally syncing up with someone else's brain and just making it easy to understand one another."

The antisocial brain

There are implications to both of these points.

First, get yourself on the same wavelength. If you want less stilted chat and more flow, do things that literally pull your brains into step: face each other, hold eye contact, and share a concrete task or story. These "neural coupling" techniques might lead to better conversations. We know that when people do the same task — at the same time, and in the same way — their brains activate similar parts. Get on the same wavelength, and hope you stay there.

Second, don't beat yourself up about it. There isn't anything mystical about "clicking" with someone; it's likely just neurological. It's very tempting to ask, "Am I the problem?" or "Am I just bad at chatting?" when it's possible that it's simply a case of brain incompatibility. It might even be incompatibility at this moment. Perhaps you're tired, or you haven't eaten enough, or your brain is still trying to process that long magazine article you read at lunch.

So, the next time you feel you've "clicked" with someone, remember that you're likely not just imagining it. Your neural activity could be syncing up in real time with another human brain, and it might be that the feeling of a great connection is an invisible biological dance ■

Source:

https://bigthink.com/mini-philosophy/the-sci-fi-hypothesis-that-explains-why-you-click-with-certain-people/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=weeklynewsletter

De-growth is the new Delight

Reinventing loss as gain

Austerity Alert! "Use it up, Wear it out, Do with it, or Do without."

Debilitating sense of loss

The times we live in, it would be fair to say, are characterized by an often debilitating sense of loss given the state of world affairs. War, and its corollaries of death and destruction, abound, with the battlefields ranging far beyond the physical exchange of bombs and bullets to mindsets that celebrate the mindless, relentless pursuit of profit to the exclusion of all else that is humane and God fearing.

Deforestation is out of control with tropical primary forests that are carbon rich and make for ecologically bio-diverse environments, having lost 16.6 million acres in 2024 alone (Dawn, October 15, 2025). Globally, deforestation is overwhelmingly driven by the expansion of permanent agriculture which accounted for 85 percent of all forest loss over the past decade. Another growing driver is mining for gold and coal, and the metals and minerals required for the renewable energy transition and the insatiable demands of the world's information technology communications sector.

Bedlam in Belem

In the light of the above the choice of Belem in Brazil, a poor northern city best known as a gateway to the Amazon rainforest, as the host of COP30 starting on November 10, is perhaps understandable. But the buzz around COP30, the most important climate talks of the year, is not about deforestation. Instead, the hue and cry amongst the expected 50,000 attendees is about the exorbitant prices for accommodation, with the Austrian president declining to attend citing high hotel prices (The News International, October 14, 2025). From the micro to the macro, the evidence and sense of loss is all pervasive.

Globally, deforestation is overwhelmingly driven by the expansion of permanent agriculture which accounted for 85 percent of all forest loss over the past decade
– Dawn, October 15, 2025

"Loss: A modern predicament"

In the midst of our multiple existential crises and the resultant chaos and confusion, one man in Germany has managed to keep his head and found his way to the eye of the storm where tranquility prevails, allowing for a detached deliberation of our predicament. Andreas Reckwitz is a professor at Humboldt University Berlin and the author of a series of books on modern culture and society, including the forthcoming "Loss: A modern predicament." Andreas Reckwitz has found the proverbial method in the madness, and has penned a piece, featured on the front page of The New York Times (October 6, 2025) titled "The West has become a land of loss."

"Resilience, redefinition and redistribution cannot abolish loss altogether. Industrial modernity and the homogeneous middle-class are gone for good. There is no return to a world before climate change"

No room for loss

From the Enlightenment (a 17th and 18th-century European intellectual movement) onward, writes the professor, progress functioned as the secular creed of the West, better known now as the Global North. "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."

"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.'"

Enduring 'less' and 'worse'

Today, that civilizational belief is under profound threat. Loss has become a pervasive condition of life in Europe and America, also known as the Global North. 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.

Climate grief

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.

"Certain losses may liberate rather than impoverish. Was the fossil fuel driven lifestyle truly progress, or a dead end of destruction masquerading as advancement?"

Locked in decline

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. 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. Europe, meanwhile, has become an aging continent. Some rural areas, suffering stark population decline, have become redoubts and strongholds of the elderly.

Western modernity's foundational lie

Loss is not new to modernity, and yet it sits uneasily with the modern ethos which assumes dynamism and improvement. The ideal of modern society is freedom from loss. This denial is Western modernity's foundational lie. As the experience of loss contradicts the modern promise of never ending progress, a general

"For centuries our societies were defined by the conviction that the future must outshine the present, just as the present surpassed the past… Everything was going to get better. In this way of thinking there was no room for loss"
– Andreas Reckwitz

sense of grievance prevails. The crucial question then becomes how to deal with loss?

Losses that liberate, not impoverish

One answer is the revaluation of loss as potential gain. The idea has emerged, especially in ecological circles that certain losses may liberate rather than impoverish.

"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"

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.

Winners and losers

Another 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.

"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 so, resilience, redefinition and redistribution cannot abolish loss altogether. Industrial modernity and the homogeneous middle-class are gone for good. There is no return to a world before climate change. 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 ■

Column by Adil Ahmad, Correspondent, TCS Octara.Com