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Expectations of Failure: Political Risks in the Moral Economy of Ignorance and Social Injustice

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Abstract

We are observing how contemporary failure regimes increasingly challenge ignorance and social injustice, and how this opens expectations for public policy to move beyond effectiveness and to pursue more emancipatory and progressive aims. Policy reinterpretations and expectations of failure however, are not coming solely from critical and alternative groups in the society. They are first and foremost political, which raises the question how does the moral economy and epistemology of just futures unfold? What are the effects of political exploitation and contamination? Our answer is to review political risks of emancipatory activism in abortion debates, which manifest high levels of polarization and contestation in relation to reproductive justice and human rights. We map out various hazards, showing how they produce what we term post-failure, and sustain emancipation fantasies and alternative policy futures that are linked with oppression effects. With this exploration we see that addressing ignorance and social injustice in policymaking has never been more essential, yet also unpredictable and convoluted in the political risks that it poses.

Keywords: Expectations of failure; Emancipatory activism; Political risks; Abortion; Ignorance; Injustice; Post-failure.

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1 Introduction

The paper explores how emerging meanings of policy failures in terms of ignorance and social injustice manufacture expectations of public policy that challenge it to be more emancipatory. This comes, however, with great risks of political instrumentalization, post-failure, and reinforcement of emancipation fantasies and alternative policy futures that are linked with oppression effects. We map out various political risks and integrate them with illustrations from abortion debates, drawing on critical failure studies and recent developments in policy studies, as well as ignorance literature.

Expectations of failure that are triggered by problematizing ignorance and social injustice open up public policy towards paths of action in more progressive directions. They urge us to come to terms with past harm and contemporary injustice in reproduction, migration, ecology, disability, and identity, for instance, thus paving the way for a more inclusive and democratic failure regime. But there is a catch. New expectations of failure, however emancipatory, also increase the exposure of policy responses to political risks. Recent developments in abortion policy, to take one of the most visible policy-failure dynamics, allow us to map out a variety of "blind spots," "politics of non-coordination" (Bach & Wegrich, 2019), and "inherent vices" (Howlett & Leong, 2022). These risks are there because emancipatory activism regarding reproductive moral economies is advanced by expectations of failure that are harnessed first and foremost politically. Politics is essential for emancipatory activism and for acknowledging new actors on the policy agenda. At the same time, politics also renders emerging imaginaries of failure as bordering on regulatory ambivalence, subordination of policy success, and the reproduction of a material culture of oppression. They produce what we term post-failure: that is, situations in which policy failures have less impact on political and institutional life than polarization and crisis exploitation, yet they are essential because they support emancipation fantasies and alternative policy futures that are linked with oppression effects.

Increasingly more, policy failures are seen to go beyond the "inability of a policy to correct or resolve a problem" (Howlett, 2014, p. 395). They also speak of ignorance and social injustice (Perng, 2020; Ruger, 2020), structural vulnerability, political arbitrariness, and epistemic gaps in policy and institutional life (Roy, 2020). This means that the world of public policy is the world of biased contexts of policy formulations, history, and patterns of politicians making poor decisions. This results in difficulties in comprehending "the effect new policies will have on the poor, minorities, persons with disabilities and migrants, and the added vulnerabilities triggered by racism and violence against particularly women" (Timmermann, 2020, p. 521). Such extension of failure meaning has implications regarding configurations and power boundaries of politics and policymaking. Focusing on ignorance and social injustice permits the inclusion of thus far invisibilized problems and social groups on the policy agenda, drawing attention to how policy responses have marginalized or may neglect, hurt, or exploit people. We see this happening in policy domains as diverse as reproduction, ecology, disability, and identity, wherein alternative "arts of failure" (see Halberstam's (2011) powerful concept) and "citizenship futures" (Roy (I), 2019-22, ESRC research project) make their way in the social and political imaginary — thus reconstructing the policy mainstream of what should really be achieved in policymaking, and what counts as success.

Recent understanding of failures in terms of ignorance and social injustice manufactures expectations of emancipatory and justice-oriented actions. It provides projections that policymaking may be approached as a tool for materializing alternative policy futures, integrating new actors, and remaking publics. At the same time, a redefinition of failure also entails certain

political hazards. Especially in politicized and polarized policy contexts, acting in the name of emancipation may occur to the detriment of social groups that are already experiencing forms of exploitation. As with Ahmed's (2010) "promise of happiness," the perspective of change brought by policy failures is inherently, if not sometimes strategically, oppressive. Or it is used to "normalize a deeply unjust and undesirable situation," as argued by Carl Cederström (Illing, 2018) to have happened because of the values of authenticity and individual freedom being hijacked by corporations and advertisers in the name of the "happiness fantasy." This means that we should be more receptive to the complexities of new failure regimes and the manner in which fantasies in the making may be instrumentalized and exploited by political and economic actors, especially in "hot situations" (Callon, 1997) and polarized "post-truth" contexts (Fischer, 2021).

We show in this paper how the problematization of alternative and fair futures triggered by policy failures is a phenomenon that exceeds the boundaries and interests of emancipatory activism as we know it — policymaking, art, science, social movements. New failure framings are also taken up, though perhaps less reflectively and self-assumedly, in the realm of the political. If failure framing moves towards a moral economy and epistemology of ignorance and social injustice, this also takes place because emancipation and alternative policy futures are an attractive and resourceful space for political instrumentalization and exploitation. Politicization and post-truth processes around reproductive health care — such as abortion policy and fetal rights laws — are telling in this regard. This is why, we argue, addressing ignorance and social injustice in public policy has never been more essential, yet also complex, unpredictable, and convoluted in the risks that it poses.

As we will discuss, abortion policy is one of the domains that undergoes extreme political polarization and failure contestation globally (Mica et al., 2023). Although in some countries the abortion debate can be regarded as settled long ago, strong policy shifts and controversy waves continue to materialize. This takes place largely in relation to the projection and anticipation of policy failures. Abortion debates are about the failure of expectations, yet the direction of change and politically enacted emancipatory activism is not self-evident. In Europe and South America, the trend is to liberalize access to abortion. In the United States, some of the states have recently embarked on restricting their policies, while in countries like Honduras and Poland even more radical limitations have been introduced to the already constraining regulations.

Our argument evolves in a few steps. First, we acknowledge the evolving theoretical understanding of failure as regime, and reveal the undergoing materialization of a moral economy and epistemology of ignorance and social injustice. Following, we draw the impact of this emergent failure regime regarding expectations and projections of progressive policy debates and emancipatory activism, at the same time making the point that anticipating change that is morally and epistemologically ridden in public policy is, however, vulnerable to political risks. Next, we investigate abortion debates, a highly contested and battled policy context, and show how expectations of failure act herein as a resource of conflicting, seemingly irreconcilable policy projections and political engagements. We indicate the inherent political risks and provide illustrations from abortion debates on how these hazards produce post-failure and support the reproduction of emancipation fantasies, and alternative policy futures with oppression effects. In conclusion, we argue that the world of policy reinterpretations and expectations of failure is first and foremost the world of everyday politics. The political has the prime and decisive emancipatory power. It provides a much more practice-based and less critically assumed redefinition of policy failure than do science, art, or social movements, for instance. Yet this does not make

it less efficient or less risky as a tool of oppressive change.

2 Failure Regimes: Moral Economies and Epistemologies in the Making

Failure is one of the most important and prolific resources of action in public policy today. We will unpack the significance of emerging shifts in failure regimes towards the problematization of ignorance and social injustice, indicating how not only a new failure regime is in the making, but also the creation of alternative policy futures and expectations.

Failure is a point of juncture. It is a disruption that allows us to see that something is not working, enabling us to move to the next level. It is often seen as a possibility to learn from one's own mistakes in order to achieve future milestones and successes. Failure thus manufactures consensus around a new policy agenda and alternative political control. At the same time, it is contested, reimagined, and reinterpreted. These characteristics allow failure to reconfigure our imaginary regarding what counts as success and accomplishment through public policy, and what are the alternative futures. This enforces a certain imaginary of change; it unlocks political agency. How and when change through failure occurs is, however, contingent not solely on its inner dynamics, but also on how we understand failure and whether we acknowledge it.

Failure has been gaining increased attention in humanities and social sciences (Alexander, 2023; Bradatan, 2023; Mica et al., 2023a). This recent scholarship talks about writing failure, knowledge production, temporalities, ethics, and states of forgetting. It advances the problematization of failure beyond success. This is why, increasingly more it is written on the fact that failures, rather than events or processes, are actually "regimes." Kurunmäki et al. (2023), for instance, discussed how failure regimes are contingent on economization. But building on their insight, we can further extend the discussion in the direction of the impact of politicization, creolization, and moralization. Appadurai & Alexander (2020), on the other hand, explored the failure regimes as a configuration of "epistemology, affect, and political economy," indicating that "failure produces and sustains cultural fantasies and regimes of expectations" (p. 1), while, coming from dancing and performance studies, Albright (2019) underlined the bodily and material experience of "falling." This is quite convergent with the attention given by Robinson & Carroll (2023) to the "material cultures," contexts and manifestations of the "gaps" between "bodies and the infrastructure used in policy implementation."

Contemporary forms of policy failure may be found to include:

- policy underreaction and overreaction (Maor, 2021),
- crisis exploitation (Liu, 2022),
- strategic ignorance (Pollock, 2022),
- patterns of vulnerability (Gilson, 2023),
- invisibility to the system (Sassen, 2019),
- hypervisibility in relation to persistent social problems (Bassel & Emejulu, 2017),
- forgetfulness (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020),
- lack of respect, and causing of humiliation (Gross & McGoey, 2023).

These forms are telling in that policy valuation occurs in relation to expectations of preparedness for future disruptions, projections of public values that actors should adhere to, and demands of social justice in response to crises. Failure is no longer the policy intervention that has gone astray or falls short of expectations as to what constitutes achievement. It is more than lack of success, or a learning implementation gap. It is linked with ignorance and social injustice (see Figure 1).

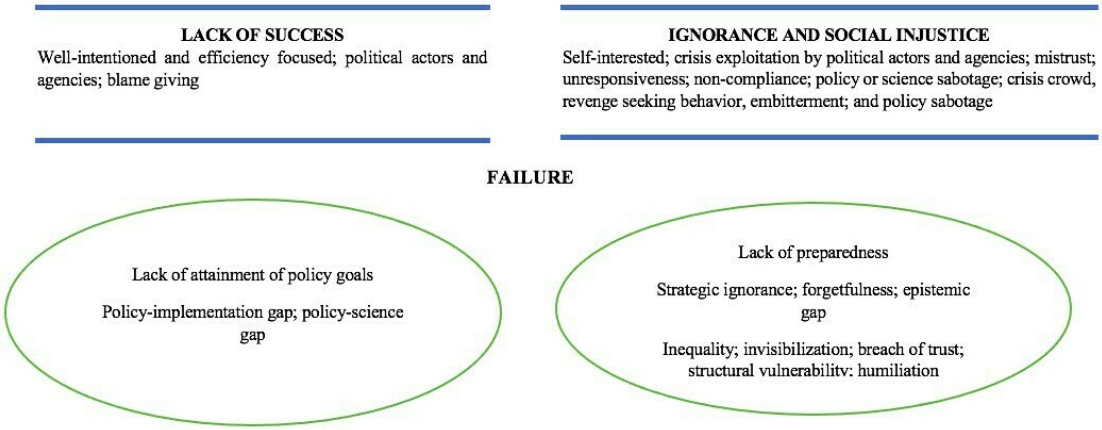

Figure 1: Failure regimes.

Policy is being increasingly measured, projected, and understood as justice metrics. Tinti (2023), for example, spoke about "scales of justice" in the policymaking of hydraulic infrastructures in the Tigris-Euphrates region. Timmermann (2020) revealed how policy responses are marked by an "epistemic gap" — "policy makers are not only unaware of the circumstances of large population groups, but are even unconscious of the fact that they are missing the bigger picture" (p. 520). Meanwhile Parviainen et al. (2021) indicated policy responses, marked by ignorance, that manifest as almost absurd mistakes and problematic choices taken in crisis contexts because of the intricate epistemic "matrix" and "temporality" of "nonknowing."

The issue of an ineffective design and implementation gap in policy failure is now complicated by the dimensions of ignorance and social injustice. What seems to have facilitated the emergence of such failure meanings is also the change in the way public policy is being depicted. As indicated by Leong & Howlett (2022), the initial connotations of failure as a lack of success in attaining policy goals stemmed from an "assumption of well-intentioned governments desiring to 'do better' in addressing ongoing social and other problems." The recently extended framing, on the other hand, incorporates assumptions of strategic ignorance (McGoey, 2019) and exploitative policy behavior (Boin et al., 2009).

These perceived shifts in the meaning of failure allow us to dive deeper into the dynamics of failure regimes now in the making: that is, examining the configurations of projections and expectations of what constitutes failure and what can be done about it in society. According to Appadurai & Alexander (2020), failure regimes are generally conditioned by elements such as power, history, and technology. These interact towards setups in which "certain epistemology, political economy, and dominant technology come together to naturalize and limit potential judgments about failure" (p. 2). For public policy it is relevant to distinguish the interaction of moral economy and epistemology in failure regimes, as this allows us to integrate recent findings about the dark side, and about distinct behavioral patterns and strategies of response to past institutional and policy harm, as well as projected future inequalities and political mischiefs.

Moral economy and epistemology are essential considerations if we want to understand how policy failures are understood, normalized, challenged, and contested, and how this unfolds in relation to policy regimes.

A lack of success, the first failure regime we identify, focuses on policy design and implementation. The goal here is learning, the concern is with what might be termed as the technical side, while the efforts are oriented towards the effectiveness of attaining policy goals. When policy goes wrong, it is usually because of misallocation of resources or a policy-implementation gap. Herein, moral economy and epistemology problematize forms of knowledge production, casting blame, and exploration of whether failure can be a source of policy success or an element of policy design for greater resilience and preparedness. On the other hand, the second failure regime, ignorance and social injustice is about overwhelming complexity (Friedman, 2009; Mueller, 2020), and uncontrollability (Rosa, 2020). It takes place in conditions of the non-knowing, "dark side" (Dunlop, 2020), that is also the naïve and contingent policy reality (Dempster & Isaacs, 2014; Page, 2014). Moral economy and epistemology negotiate the extent to which policy responses in times of crisis provoke effects that marginalize people, who absurdly hang in an institutional limbo and experience difficulties in accessing policy responses overall (Ritchie, 2021). It goes without saying, a central feature of these two failure regimes is that they are not fully separated. Politicians, policy makers and society do not exit one regime and enter the other. What is more, observably, the two regimes also symbiotically feed one another. They have a political and ideological compatibility. This notwithstanding, the discontinuity between them becomes perceptible when we try to delineate the expectations they produce and what society and institutional life can achieve through policy failure in each of these two regimes. In the failure regime of ignorance and social injustice the possibilities of contestation and further acts of normalization, as we will show, are basically boundless, uncontrollable, and imperceptible because they are undertaken in the name of values and moral-political change.

In public policy, what has produced and visibilized the move towards problematizing inequality and social injustice is certainly COVID-19 and its globalization order. The pandemic revealed how policy responses in contexts of contingency and non-knowing are prone to mistakes and "anecdotal" instances of ignorance. COVID-19 increased public awareness of patterns of vulnerability and injustice brought by policy responses to crises (see McNeely & Schintler, 2020; Béland et al., 2022; Pollock, 2022; Burke in Rego & Borbosa, 2021; Burke, 2023). Additionally, it indicated the range and extremes of political emotions that materialize in relation to crisis governance, and patterns of response to frustration linked with body and health representations (Linden et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2023). Forgotten injustices, tolerated stalemate, ignored structural vulnerabilities and subjection to bullying and shaming have become the new forms of failure. Grasping them is important because it translates into areas of intervention, redefinition, and reinterpretation of public policy and political agenda through drawing new policy futures and priorities.

3 Expectations

What are the consequences of extended meanings of failure in public policy? What happens when we add ignorance and injustice to the way we understand policy failures? We will familiarize ourselves with expectations of failure, and develop an incipient typology. Focusing on expectations will allow us to observe current "modalities of harnessing failure," to borrow Easterling's (2019) insight from architecture studies, as well as to begin building our argument

regarding the risks coming from the political in relation to the recently consolidating failure regime of ignorance and social injustice, and the polarization around policy futures in post-truth contexts.

The idea that changes in failure regimes happen and that they are consequential for society and institutional life is probably one of the major contributions of critical failure studies to the way we should read the dynamics of the contemporary world. Posing a similar question in relation to the emerging meaning of failure in the new digital technology, Appadurai & Alexander (2020), for instance, argued that the transformation of techno-failure in terms of increased frequency and normalized anticipation changes everything. According to these authors, the regularity of digital device breakdown generates a failure dynamic as "epistemology" and "affective economy" that is further consequential for the technological sector (p. 10). Failure becomes a "commodity," and for it to be able to behave as such "it requires a method for forgetting failure, so as to allow its continuous repetition" (p. 16).

Failure changes are thus extremely consequential. They seem to be undergoing extension and reinterpretation across domains. To explore the emerging moral economy and epistemology in the terrain of public policy, we should further discuss what forms of anticipation and expectation are actually nurtured in relation to failure. What agentic possibilities are opened by extending the meaning of failure to ignorance and social injustice?

Insights from economic sociology, feminist affect theory, and the anthropology of science and technology, as well as policy studies allow us to understand how social processes and institutions engage expectations of social change and of attaining states of well-being and economic efficiency. The economic systems are embedded in imaginaries of the future that are founded on "fictional expectations" (Beckert, 2016). These forms of projection direct us "toward certain life choices and away from others" (Ahmed, 2010). Understanding the dynamics of institutions and processes means understanding their future. "Doing the right thing" safeguards "happiness" (Ahmed, 2010). "Aspiration," "voice," and "hope" are linked with empowerment (Hirschman, 1971; Appadurai, 2004). Optimism is associated with knowledge production and perseverance (Firestein, 2022). Money, credit, and other market institutions are shaped by a "promise of utility in the future" (Beckert, 2016, p. 24), a "promise of convenience" (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020), and a promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010). We are influenced by objects, institutions, and processes that make us nurture expectations. This endows institutional and market life with "promissory legitimacy" (Beckert, 2020), making us loyal to these expectations even when they feed "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011) and the promises are broken (Beckert 2020).

As with happiness and hope, failures are about the future. They comprise promissory legitimacy that benefits "future-oriented" political, economic, and calculative processuality. This is why it is relevant to tackle the social and political construction of evolving understandings, expectations, and valorization mechanisms in relation to policy failures (see Nyström et al., 2018 for "what counts as success" in higher education, for instance). Expectations of failure are a path to the future. As with other socially instituted skills — such as the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) — they serve functions of coordination, association, and navigation in social reality.

The expectation economy and the promissory fictionality of failure is especially discernable in public policy. Certainly, it would be awkward to say "I just want you to fail," the same way we are socialized to employ "I just want you to be happy" (see Ahmed (2010) for the promise of happiness). Nevertheless, we do have a cultural repertoire of motivational speeches about how "Failure leads to success." These depict failure as a lesson, as an experience or an opportunity.

We operate with expectations of failure as day-to-day resources for action. Failures offer directions to improvement, they trigger alertness, they tell us about the weak points and blind spots that we should fill or address. And it is in this sense that failure occurs as a necessary tool of improvement, because it basically says what is wrong with how we aim to achieve and struggle for happiness, with the way we use hope, or employ our institutions.

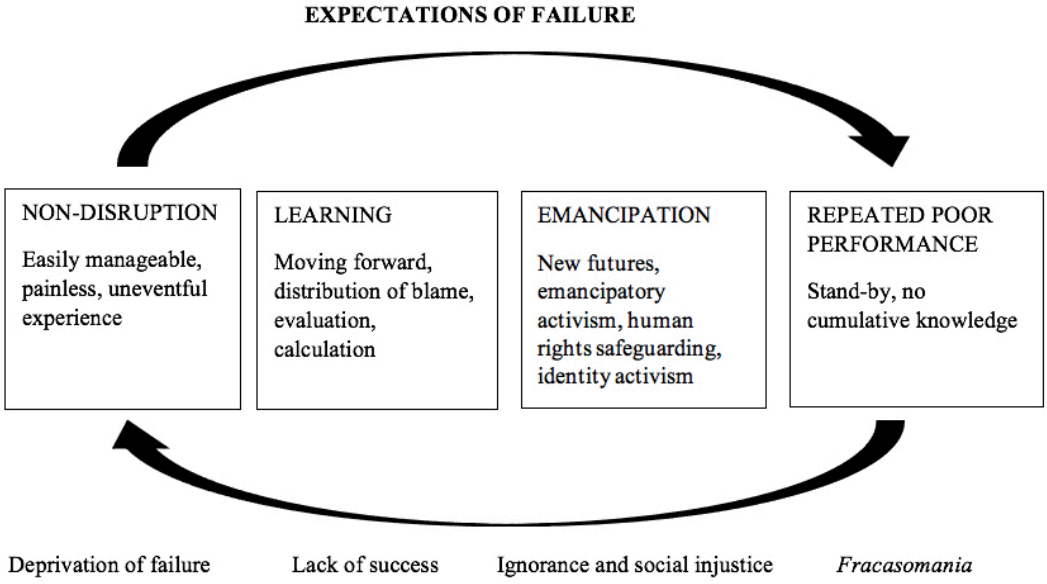

Figure 2: Expectations of failure.

How can we talk about failure as a form of anticipation, as being orientated towards the future? How to visualize failure fictionality and its mechanisms? Browsing through works and articles on the contemporary dynamics of crises and neoliberal governance allows us to understand just how important the expectation of failure is, and how it is harnessed by distinct failure regimes. We have already touched on the failure regime of a lack of success and the failure regime of ignorance and social injustice. Yet these are linked with generic forms of failure expectations that seem to be bordered by other more extravagant manifestations: non-disruption on the one hand, and repeated poor performance on the other (Figure 2).

Non-disruption, the expectation that failure that should be easily coped with, may be recognized in recent studies in digital anthropology about "uneventful," "non-revelatory," and forgettable forms of failure that are advanced by new technologies. Taylor (2023), for instance, discussed how cloud backup and maintenance-restore services "transform the anticipation of digital failure into a commercial opportunity." According to this author, non-disruption expectations "bolster a culture of routine device upgrading and electronic waste (e-waste) production" (p. 223). The processes we encounter in new data storage manifest defense against failure as disruptive and eventful. These seem in the long run to translate to deprivation from the very things that failure should entail: moving forward through moments of rupture, resilience through hitting rock bottom, or the ability to "produce new knowledge about the machine and, in turn, a new understanding of the world" (Appadurai & Alexander, 2020, p. 11). Non-disruption expectations also came into focus in attempts by higher education administrators in prestigious American universities to explain low levels of resilience in young generations. These are seen to be the effect of rather underdeveloped skills in coping with life's difficulties

in otherwise ambitious students (Guest, 2018).

Repeated poor performance, the expectation that failure is happening again, and again, and again (as in the *Groundhog Day* movie, 1993), transforms the policy experience, not by avoiding fiascos — as in the non-disruption expectations — but by expecting "renewed failure" (Hirschman 1975, p. 395), and proactively anticipating it to the point of self-depreciation and ignorance of what has been achieved. Hirschman (1975) discussed this expectation when the scrutinization of development projects in Latin America in the 1960s led him to uncover the phenomenon of *fracasomania* [failure complex]. This is a particular manifestation of policy contexts that are over-motivated to bring change through policymaking and achieve quick and major results, and thus has an inhabited tendency to be impatient and quickly declare a fiasco. Failure and crises induce expectations of meaningful change. Yet change, Hirschman argued, is discarded if it is too slow, too limited, or not too visible. This principle was carried forward by Grabel (2019), who applied a neo-Hirschmanian perspective to obstacles to perceive the effects of change in relation to major episodes of crisis in global financial governance. The edgy expectations of change, she found, thus trigger projections of failure in public policy. Lack of change is the most often lamented, or at least noticeably absent element in the accounts of effects of contemporary crises and failures. Best (2020) launched the term "quiet failures" to depict this perception that "significant economic failures did not have the kind of political effects that we might expect."

Placed between non-disruption and repeated poor performance, learning is probably the most familiar and normalized expectation regarding the role of failure in public policy, and everyday life. The promise of learning, and the resistance to, or difficulty in absorbing or implementing failure knowledge has been the recurrent focus of extremely valuable and groundbreaking work in policy studies (Dunlop et al., 2018). A certain crisis, however ensued, due, we reckon, to the undergoing political polarization and configuration of alternative media ecosystems (Kelkar, 2019). These integrate in a post-truth context in which "feelings" weigh heavier than "evidence," and "alternative facts" replace "facts" (McIntyre, 2018). In this context, the revelation of certain situations as ignorance and social injustice is rather meant to bring a mobilization of political emotions and to replenish imaginaries than to learn from failure, and reformulate public policy. Appealing to emotions and feelings (Boler & Davis, 2018), often using social media, allows one to gain a quick advantage over political opponents.

Post-truth indicates that we might also be at the beginning of a post-failure script, wherein feelings concerning the political agenda play havoc or exploit policy evaluations. In this context then, accounts of ignorance and social injustice do not bring forth emancipation but rather "alternative emancipation." Meanwwhile, "expectations of future failures," and the emotions triggered by these, are more significant than facts, actual mischiefs, and proofs of institutional harm. Post-failure plays havoc with public policy understood as a cycle that should start by placing a particular topic on the political agenda and conclude with an evaluation that triggers learning from mistakes and failures, ultimately. Post-failure thus renders that, despite depicting public policy in relation to expectations of learning from failure, for political actors, it is still the post-truth context that is more attractive. This is because it allows the proliferation of expectations with regard to ignorance and social injustice and pushes the activation of emotions in relation to projected and debated policy futures.

How does this understanding of failure as ignorance and social injustice impact expectations of failure in public policy? What does it bring that is new in relation to the expectations of learning that materialize in the failure regime that is preoccupied with success and policy effectiveness? Framing failure as ignorance and social injustice is performative, opening avenues

of activism where awareness-raising and emancipation can be developed through the introduction of new future imaginaries. Such meanings of failure are foundational for new policy goals and futures. This happens because failure generally has a quite projective and future-oriented dimension. The proposed meanings of failure translate into new evaluation frameworks, futures of policymaking, and associations. Talking about failure as ignorance and social justice allows the capacity for emancipation as an expected element, as one dimension of change that failure is associated with.

Policy changes are realized through rearticulation of existent failure regimes. If we want to change the course of policymaking, we must change how we define failure within it. Reimagined regimes of failure operate at a meta-normative and unconscious level of public policy, allowing to bring long-term changes through shifts in moral contexts and valuation models, and opening the way for policy combat. Redefining failure need not come in the form of a straightforward revaluation of how we measure failure and success. We do not necessarily need to contest who are the winners and the losers in public policy. Neither do we have to engage in "hot" debates and contestations (Callon, 1997). It is enough to engage in blatant and implicit redrawing of the perimeter of who is in and who is out, who has social visibility and who is invisible, who has a future and who does not have a future in public policy, as we will see in the following section of the paper, which focuses on abortion policy, a redefinition of reproductive futures, and the role of particular social categories within them.

Emancipatory activism in relation to the demands of social justice, epistemic inclusion, and new imaginaries in public policy have been especially articulate and powerful when coming from critical studies such as queer theory, performance and arts theory, feminist studies, etc. This literature has been pioneering in arguing that the modality in which we frame the future in relation to particular social identities — which are less mainstream or are outwardly marginalized — has a bearing on how we position them on possible trajectories of success and/or failure. Expectations of failure in relation to emancipatory activism materialize attempts to redefine social identities in public policy and draw models of failure that broaden or narrow down the envisioning of future possibilities. Failure is not only a retrospective social judgement — the scope has been derailed, the aims have not been achieved — but it is also a prospective tool in policymaking. The more policy failure is associated with underreaction, strategic ignorance, and breach of trust, the easier it is for us to draw a policy repertoire that is set at targeting forms of social injustice.

At the same time, emancipatory activism also manufactures opportunities for "crisis exploitation" and other political risks (Boin et al., 2009). Ahmed (2010) and Berlant (2011) have already shown how this works in the case of the promise of happiness and "cruel optimism." The oppressive element in expectations of failure, we may add, is linked with the fact that learning or emancipating through failure are not universally attainable. But they are prescribed to certain institutions and patterns of behavior. Further, redefining failure as ignorance and social injustice sets in motion expectations embedded in normative regimes, which entertain contradictions and dissonances at the level of practice. These normative threads, as shown by Robinson & Carroll (2023), entail political disruption and policy gap, rather than harmony and synergy:

> Taken in total, our argument is that policy which is underpinned by normative assumptions, fails at the macro level because it creates failure on the micro level via the incommensurable gap between the lived capacities of individual residents of a nation and the ethical assumptions made by the infrastructure of care concerning the role of these residents (p. 331).

The political risks in expectations of failure are also linked with the fact that redrawing political imaginaries have the effects of exclusion and structural violence on the social with a non-dominant and already vulnerable position in society. Unlike happiness and hope, failure does not have the status of a socially and symbolically desirable good. If anything, there are rather anxieties and fears associated with it. This is why redefinition in the form of what we may term the new arts of failure is all the more emancipatory and trickier (see "queer art of failure" in Halberstam, 2011). This makes the whole process more interesting, and discovering it essential.

4 Abortion Policy and Political Risks

How do we know that it is ultimately the refashioning of the meaning of failure that impacts the production of failure expectations and policy imaginaries? What is the link with the materialization of emancipatory activism and the advancement of the interests of new actors? And how does the redefinition of failure enter into interaction with other policy resources and political behaviors? We will answer these questions by bringing in illustrations from contemporary abortion debates that allow us to map out distinct political risks and their outcome as producing post-failure and reinforcing additional emancipation fantasies, and alternative policy futures that are linked with oppression effects.

Abortion debates, the exemplification we turn to in this paper, are particularly dynamic and rich in expectations of failure and alternative policy futures. Abortion is increasingly being taken up as a social justice issue generally. This salience is observable globally. Abortion debates develop as "sites of hyperprojectivity" (Mische, 2014) that advance political polarization and social movement activism in relation to human rights, health risk ignorance, and reproductive injustice, on both local and global levels. The reproductive issue, and associated themes such as motherhood, adoption, and care, play a polarizing role in politics (Segal, 2020). As noticed by Briggs (2017), neoliberal processes transform reproductive social and political processes to the extent that "all politics became reproductive politics, and remained so" (p. 14).

The impact of the neoliberal processes on abortion debates is also observable in the failure perspective that is employed when depicting reproductive processes and events. As discussed by Moore and Cattapan (2020), the reproductive narrative converges with a quite complex and evaluative "failure speak." We are used to talking in terms of unintended pregnancy, menstruation, menopause, and reproductive vulnerability (Alspaugh et al., 2020; Hayter, 2005). We engage with "technoscientific" imaginaries regarding problems associated with reproductive behaviors and fertile bodies. According to Bertotti et al. (2021), "ranking birth control methods by failure rates rather than by side effects or reproductive autonomy becomes logical as efficacy is equated with safety for cisgender women and society" (p. 1). The failure perspective facilitates a gendered framing of reproduction or fertility, distributing responsibility and blame for the failure of reproductive control (unwanted pregnancies) on women, whose bodies are routinely made into sites of failure (Alexander, 2023; Martin, 1987). The failure discourse, the critical literature suggests, reproduces the political risks of placing women under reproductive pressure. Moore & Cattapan (2020) showed that the jargon describing women's bodies in terms of reproduction and associating failure with infertility disempowers them. While according to Boltanski (2013), modern means of contraception put much of the responsibility of preventing the undesired pregnancy on women, not on men.

Abortion, as a technical element designed to cope with failure of contraception becomes through bio-politicization a categorization device of generic reproductive subjectivities. As

remarked by Beddoe (2022), it moves from "essential healthcare" to a "focus of scrutiny and judgement." The changed types of failure that abortion is intended to cope with also radically conditions the normative register. Though highly controversial and not universal, abortion may be acknowledged as a tool for contraceptive failure, yet it may not be accepted as a strategic coping resource for reproductive subjectivities that are transgressive. Beynon-Jones (2013) remarked in this regard that "As a woman's number of return visits to the clinic increases, the contraceptive 'problem' evidenced by abortion is located ever more precisely as a 'failure' of female subjectivity (rather than, for example, a 'failure' of technology)" (p. 108).

Abortion further translates into a socio-politically complex entanglement of medical failures and threats to reproductive autonomy. Boltanski (2013) remarked, for instance, that a considerable number of cases are rather categorizable as "failures of engendering" (that is procreation) rather than "failures of contraception," in the "sense of mechanical failure" (p. 5). This makes abortion a good ground for political suspicion and social ambivalence. It is generally seen as an intersection of agency, race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, sexuality, health, and technology dimensions that are additionally instrumentalized by neoliberal mechanisms of domination and marginalization (Dayi & Karakaya, 2018; Beynon-Jones, 2013). The collaborative work edited by Roy & Thompson (2019) on adoption, abortion, and surrogacy in neoliberalism revealed, for instance, how these entanglements externalize in cases such as surrogacy in Mexico, forced sterilization in Peru, and racialized biopolitics in post-Katrina Mississippi.

Expectations of failure brought by abortion debates entail projected assumptions of change in the direction of increased recognition and reproductive autonomy for political subjectivities that are seen to be subjected to ignorance, inequality, and other forms of vulnerability. These expectations of change, often accompanied by projected dangers and threats of what would happen should the change not materialize, are an essential element of abortion debates today, and constitute a resource for reproductive politics. In the US, for instance, Oberman (2022) made the point of "three nebulous assumptions" about "What will and won't happen when abortion is banned" (p. 1) — abortion bans will deter abortion, they will send a message, or they will be fully implemented and enforced. Expectations of failure and projections of the effects of regulatory changes intermingle in various dimensions, from the normative, the favorite terrain of politicians, to the body, as experienced by society. This makes expectations of failure often come across as a struggle, rather than as elements of policy innovation and learning that should help us move forward (Figure 3).

Abortion debates disclose reproductive governance as a political and policy terrain of the "intersection of multiple oppressions" (Opondo & Harper, 2022). Changes in local abortion laws may develop gendered institutions, social prejudices, and reproductive stigma, especially against already vulnerable people in society, such as low-income and ethnically marginalized groups. This has been shown, for instance, to be the case when funds are limited for public contraceptive access to those who need it, but cannot afford it (Hyatt et al., 2022). Emancipatory activism, on the other hand, may also unwillingly invisibilize existent structural vulnerabilities, or it may lead to misrepresentations and mitigations of reproductive phenomena in pop culture. In a sharp online reply to the overrepresentation of white women and middle-class families in recent proliferating films about young women who cope with unwanted pregnancies and decide to keep the babies, Churchwell (2008; Latimer, 2009) for instance noted that the everyday reality is a bit different. Contrary to pop culture representations, "white, affluent women" are actually underrepresented in statistics of unwanted pregnancies and abortion. Herein, most visible are poor, black, and Hispanic women.

Abortion debates show the extent to which reproductive policy evolves around future chil-

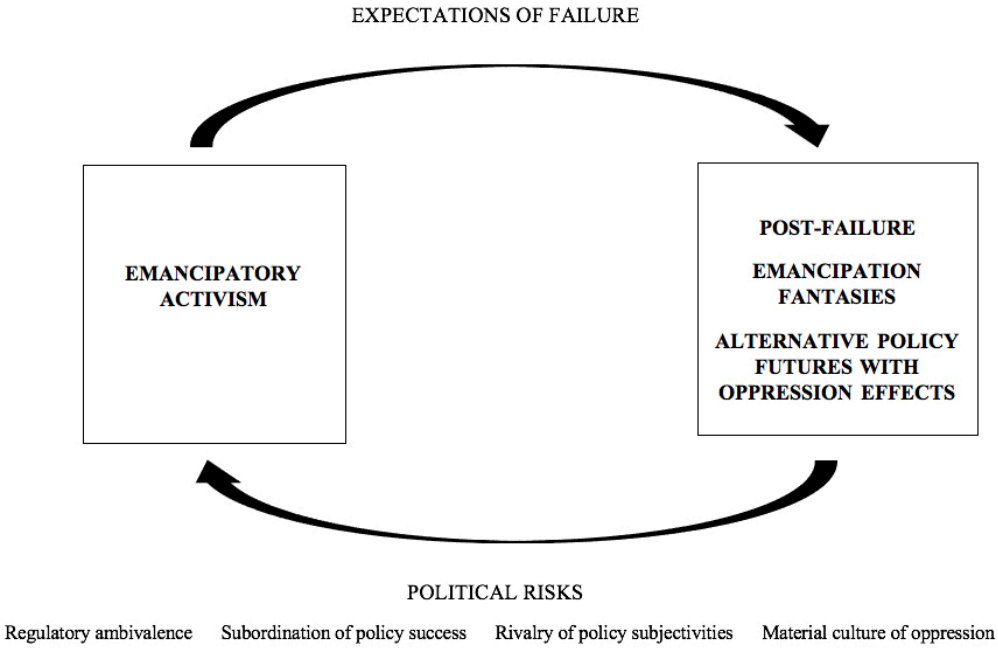

Figure 3: Political risks in the moral economy of ignorance and social injustice (case study: abortion debates).

dren. As remarked by Edelman (2004), in both pro-life and pro-choice camps this emancipation is being taken up in the name of the future and the necessity to safeguard the children.

> That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. Even proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a "fight for our children — for our daughters and our sons," and thus as a fight for the future (p. 3).

What do abortion debates reveal about the political risks inherent in the moral economy and epistemology of ignorance and injustice? They provide insight, for instance, into how contingency and uncertainty are induced in the regulatory regimes and social perceptions of human rights. As indicated by Bucholc (2022–2027, ERC project) on her review of abortion debates and figurations in three regional human rights systems — the African Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organization of American States — the abortion debates advance the "ambivalence of human rights" as "they were used successfully to argue both for more liberal and more restrictive abortion laws."

The political risks of emancipatory activism in abortion debates also build on the contradiction between the tremendous value of children on the one hand, and inequalities in the safeguarding of the human rights of children on the other hand. These asymmetries constitute manifestations of more general hierarchies of reproductive worth and mechanisms of disciplining and control involving mothers, families, and children (Sawicki, 1991; Inglot et al., 2022). The dynamics of abortion-related arguments and disability rights advocacy is probably the most telling example in this regard. The institutionalization of contention and polarization around

global abortion issues have effected convergence between the causes of reproductive advocacy (in the case of both pro-life and pro-choice) and disability rights activism. Yet, as observed by various authors, this thematic linkage is oftentimes instrumentalized politically for moving reproductive policy goals forward through disability policymaking. According to Giric (2016), for instance, US laws that advance criminalization of abortion based on genetic abnormality "carry the veneer of enhancing the position of disabled individuals in society as a means to a very specific end — to discourage abortion" (p. 736). She sees the politicization of disability rights as a tool for advancing regulation and control of the reproductive agenda, and relationship between professionals, experts and social groups.

Political risks linked with expectations of failure in abortion debates also stem from the reinvention of moral orders, the emerging of new institutions, and the making of policy subjectivities that are premised on inevitable conflicts with, and the effects of subordinating the political identity of, other social groups. For example, the politically supported emergence of new policy actors, such as unborn children, may occur in conditions of policy stalemate or the continued oppression of groups already in a vulnerable position in reproductive biopolitics, such as mothers. They are at risk of being further marginalized in policy debates that should prioritize their subjectivities, yet do not, or do so partly or fragmentarily. Because of being sidelined, invisibilized, or interpreted through the needs of newly emerging identities of children in the infrastructure of care and support, the policy subjectivities of women or of other groups acquire new characteristics of oppression and marginalization.

The effects of exploitation and contamination also come from the fact that emancipatory activism may be instrumentalized to advance polarization and regulatory interventions that are not necessarily driven by success, not policy success anyway. As we discussed earlier, to understand why this happens it is useful to rely on the notions of post-truth and post-failure, which push forward patterns and situations in which emotions, alternative futures, and political polarizations monopolize the reading and evaluation of political and institutional life, to the detriment of facts and evaluations. Our ongoing research on abortion debates in Poland (Mica et al., 2023c), for instance, showed that abortion debates became intermingled with political success, and that policy failure is a resource of political dynamism and projections for the political domain. The phenomenon of "what will and won't happen when abortion is banned," or when it is legalized for that matter, is not only rhetorical, but also material and performative. In relation to the effects of the harsher abortion restrictions in Poland following the 2022 ruling of the constitutional court, for instance, pro-choice activists projected that this will lead to liberalization in the future, while pro-life activists pushed for the anticipation of potential failures in the implementation of the just-tightened abortion restrictions, or for even further radicalization of emancipatory activism to safeguard the constitutional and human rights of unborn children. Failures in both pro-life and pro-choice emancipatory activism in Poland are disruptive, yet inherent events that allow the proliferation of newly endangered policy futures and avenues of activism. Policy failures also oftentimes materialize by default, because the emancipatory activism that might have prevented them from occurring did not happen and this had far-reaching consequences. This is illustrated by the series of "anticipable" yet unexpected abortion-related deaths of pregnant women who died of sepsis in Poland since the increased restrictions of access to legal abortion.

Emancipatory fantasies and alternative policy futures are reinforced by failure regimes that problematize ignorance and social injustice while at the same time producing oppression effects. Contemporary policy failures materialize as social affects, cultural perceptions, body inscriptions, anxiety, and stress (both individual and social). The political risks of problematizing

these failures lead however to suffering and death linked with emancipatory activism becoming mitigated by post-failure phenomena, which entail basically the legitimation or rationalization of oppression effects of public policy that is conductive to political success. This mitigation is possible because the focus is on the feelings triggered by endangered futures, and not on the evaluation of policy outcomes. For the same reason, the importance of learning from failures is declining, while the relevance of social change and defense of alternative policy futures turns on emotions that lead to expectations of failure.

We should be aware that the dynamic of political risks does not mean that the emancipatory agenda mediated and produced by the political is not there. The effects of change and emergence of alternative futures is very visible. Yet so is the material culture of oppression around it, which might be indicative of the manifestation of the phenomenon of promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), this time in public policy. Challenging ignorance and social injustice through policymaking has never been more essential, yet it is also tricky and unpredictable in the potentialities and dangers that it poses in hot policy contexts and everyday politics.

5 Conclusions and Food for Thought

We have considered in this paper how contemporary failure regimes increasingly challenge ignorance and social injustice. We have made the point that this raises expectations for public policy to move beyond effectiveness and to pursue more emancipatory and progressive aims. At the same time, these expectations are often risky and oppressive, because they do not come solely from critical and alternative groups in society. They are first and foremost political. We have reviewed the political risks of emancipatory activism in abortion debates, which manifest high levels of polarization and contestation in relation to reproductive justice and human rights. We have mapped out various hazards, showing how they produce what we term post-failure and sustain emancipation fantasies and alternative policy futures that are linked with oppression effects. With this exploration we have developed a theory around the moral economy and epistemology of ignorance and social injustice in public policy, showing how expectations of failure play an essential role in bringing about change, yet are also complex, unpredictable, and convoluted in the political risks that they pose.

The conventional approach to the role of failure in public policy asks for a story of future success, or success that could be easily attained, at least in theory, should only the right people do the right thing. Ansell (2023), for instance, employed this narrative when he pointed out that politics fails because of the contradiction between the individual and collective interests. The solution, he pointed out, would be to fix the institutional arrangements to enable the avoidance of failures in domains such as democracy, equality, solidarity, security, or prosperity. The failure expectations perspective we have developed herein, however, allows us to see that fixing problems has a meaning for paradigms of policymaking that stipulate failure as a tool for moving towards policy success. The explanatory models of policy failures, and the practice of failure, however, can be very different. Expectations of failure are contingent on organizational and cultural failure regimes that are quite dynamic and developing counter-intuitively. Malpas & Wickham (1995), for instance, argued that failure, and not "success," is an "ubiquitous and central feature of social life" (p. 37). In this sense the conventional belief that policymaking might be fixed may come across as naïve, because failure is an inherent element of incomplete projects of governance.

Coming to terms with forms of failure expectation is essential if we want to understand the underlining context and political infrastructure of recent developments around such seemingly irrational issues, like Brexit forms of anticipation, Make America Great Again (MAGA) projections, or the conservative revolution and denialist turn of manifestations in relation to ecology (Latour, 2018). Likewise, we still know little about expectations in the areas where there is intersection and overlap with failure as renewed poor performance, such as those linked with career regimes that normalize rejection as "just the way it goes." We see painful failures in writing (McNally, 2018) and a CV of failures and rejections in science (Stefan, 2010). There are also expectations linked with the ritualization and institutionalization of aggression — such as being prepared for mass school shootings in the US as explored by Healy (2021) — "My son and daughter have been institutionally readied to be shot dead as surely as I, at their age, was readied by my school to receive my first communion." Another form that warrants immediate attention are expectations of failure in policy processes that are seen to entail elements of scam and transgression — for example, the "policy deception" in Brexit-related policy fiascos (Baines et al., 2020).

Shifting meanings of policy failures render link policymaking with different repertoires of expectation. Moving towards a moral economy and epistemology of ignorance and social injustice allows us to redefine the emancipatory promise of policy failures, yet this is not without political and material risks. The reason for this is that beyond critical thinking and emancipatory activism, expectations of failure are enacted through political interaction. Politics is the terrain where failure becomes business as usual.

The remainder of this paper argues that failure as a lack of success of policy projects is superseded in the political process. Although policy learning continues to be an issue, the problematization of ignorance and social injustice is proliferating as a resource for political change. The two failure regimes are interacting in the political and public sphere, and sometimes it is hard to tell which is which. They operate together and bring feelings of confusion because some actors interpret the actions of others through the frame of a failure regime, which is not necessarily the one that motivates the actions of the other actors. Regulatory debates around contested issues — such as abortion — are strategic for revealing this dynamic. The political users of post-failure often come out as winners because their rivals continue to expect that something can be learned from failure. Yet the post-failure politicians are less concerned about the learning process, or they learn differently, more passively, and by imitation. They rather expect failure to be a handy and contingent political tool. Thus, post-failure politicians have a tremendous advantage when they can trick the system into believing that failure is something to learn from, and something that should lead to success and emancipation, when in fact they know that this reading of reality is no longer the case.

Do the political risks of new meanings of failure in regulatory debates bring us to the conclusion that challenging ignorance and social injustice boils down to the dark side of policymaking? Expectations of failure, we argue, uncover not only new ideas of emancipation and their political risks but also the complexity of failure-policy connections and the importance of revealing the epistemological models of our political imaginaries. This problem is quite tricky to grasp because on the surface the involved actors use the language of success, or, more recently, that of emancipation. Yet, what we have intended to show in this article is that whatever the official story of failure is, at the end of the day we are inevitably confronted with evidence that this increasingly ceases to be a problem for political leaders. Failure is actually a resource for action and for political success.

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