

The Moral Economy of Failure

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Abstract

This paper attempts to place contemporary market and state-based surveillance and monitoring regimes within a moral economy framework with the aim of developing a sociological approach to the moral economy of failure. The paper begins by reviewing different understandings of moral economy and their applications, both historical and contemporary, across different political, economic, and cultural contexts. It then sets out an approach to moral economy that focuses both on the norms and sentiments that frame economic and social relations and their associated practices as well as the ways in which these practices are legitimated. Following this the paper examines the literature on failure in different spaces including failure of markets, valuation regimes, and innovations. We focus on organisational and professional failures, market failures, failures of governance and policy and failures in innovation and experimentalism. In each case the discussion relates the scholarship on failure to the moral economy highlighting the interrelationships between the two and how practices related to failure are reframed and legitimated. Our discussion highlights a double standard with respect to failure. For some, generally the wealthy and powerful, it is possible to embrace failure; to hold it up as an example of one's capacity to adapt, to survive to embrace new ideas and through individual resilience, to learn and grow from the experience. But in other circumstances particularly for those living in poverty, for marginal groups and for the racially profiled, failure attracts shame, stigma, and punishment. We conclude by arguing that a research agenda addressing the moral economy of failure needs to be built on socio-historical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments. We suggest this offers a way of identifying progressive futures and acts as an antidote to much of the hype that underpins contemporary accounts of success and innovation.

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Indeed, it is important to note that most plans fail, most schemes for the future are not realized. To study futures we need to focus on the unfiled treatments, the unfinished novels, the unexploited patent, policies not adopted; in short we need to open up an archive of failure. (Edgerton, 2019, p. 175)

Don't believe the hype. (Public Enemy, 1988)

1 Introduction

In January 2023, Ruth Perry, 53, a headteacher who had worked at a primary school in the UK for 13 years, took her own life after she was informed, following an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), that her school was being downgraded from Outstanding to Inadequate. The case led to complaints from her family, the local MP and teaching unions about the specific inspection, the work of Ofsted more generally, and its impact on individuals, schools and communities. The coroner concluded that her suicide was “contributed to by an Ofsted inspection carried out in November 2022” (Adams, 2023). While explanations of suicidal acts are complex and cannot be divorced from the mental well-being of a given individual, the immediate social environment, and the broader social context, Ruth's case was a tragic illustration of the personal and wider costs of contemporary surveillance, monitoring, and assessment regimes. In contrast, narratives of failure, while underpinning such regimes, can also buttress the ideology of free markets and neo-liberalism. The UK prime minister Rishi Sunak, in an interview with Elon Musk, recently suggested people should be more willing to give up regular pay and “be comfortable with failure” (Wingate, 2023). This remark, highly criticised at the time, reflects a culture feeding on failure and success stories that promotes and valorises entrepreneurs. Here the embrace of failure, often by already rich and successful individuals who can afford the odd setback is viewed as a positive and heroic act. This paper attempts to place such regimes (market- and state-based) and ideas within a moral economy framework with the aim of developing a sociological approach to the moral economy of failure.

The paper begins by reviewing different understandings of moral economy and their applications, both historical and contemporary, across different political, economic, and cultural contexts. Drawing on Andrew Sayer's corpus of work it then sets out an approach to moral economy that focuses *both on the norms and sentiments that frame economic and social relations and their associated practices as well as the ways in which these practices are legitimated*. Following this the paper examines the literature on failure in different spaces, including failure of markets, valuation regimes, and innovations. We focus on organisational and professional failures, market failures, failures of governance and policy and failures in innovation and experimentalism. In each case the discussion relates the scholarship on failure to the conceptualisation the moral economy highlighting the interrelationships between the two and how practices related to failure are reframed and legitimated. We conclude by arguing that a moral economy of failure needs to be built on socio-historical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments. Returning to the work of David Edgerton we suggest this offers a way of identifying progressive futures and acts as an antidote to much of the hype that underpins contemporary accounts of success and innovation.

2 Moral Economies

The antecedents of the concept of a moral economy can be traced at least to Aristotle, who viewed economic relations through a political and ethical framing and indeed saw politics and the pursuit of a good life primary to economic relations. The concept clearly predates classic political economy and has a complicated and variegated history as charted by Götz (2015). But many writers (including Götz), use the debates surrounding E.P. Thompson's (1971) account of a moral economy among the English working class and his subsequent elaboration of that initial argument (Thompson, 1991) as a stepping off point.

Thompson conceived the moral economy in relation to conflict over food prices and described it as a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations. Together these described a taken for granted view of the proper economic functions of various parties within the community which Thompson viewed as constituting the moral economy of the poor. Criticising Thompson's account as constructing too strong a dichotomy where the free market is devoid of moral concerns, Götz and other writers refer to the concept of moral economy as an alternative route to economic accounts centred on maximising utility and the sovereign consumer that brings in altruistic relations into economic decision-making. However, as Didier Fassin (2009; Fassin & Stoczkowski, 2008) points out, and E.P. Thomson indicated in his 1991 follow up review essay, he was not suggesting that the peasantry were somehow more moral than free trade advocates.

The literature addressing the concept has grown in scope and application since Thompson's historical essays. Fassin charts the use of the concept in different ways in studies of African states, racial inequalities in the USA, and AIDS in South Africa. In doing so, Fassin sets out two levels of analysis for moral economy. First it can be viewed as a system of exchange that characterises pre-market systems. Here he draws links with Polanyi's (2001) idea of (dis)embeddedness as a critique of capitalism, and earlier anthropological work around reciprocity. Palomera & Vetta (2016) state that these critiques are primarily concerned with naive treatments of the concept that view it in binary terms; constructing a sharp divide between economic practices and morality through the ideal of a pure social economy that predates market formation. Other scholars, including Carrier (2018), have taken a more critical approach, arguing that the ideal of a moral economy has become an empty symbol; a container for a confused collection of varied meaning and uses. Carrier argues that a more precise definition of moral economy can be found in the mutual obligations that arise when people "transact with each other over time". This helps set up a distinction between the moral values that provide the context for economic activity and those that arise from the activity *qua* activity; an approach that demands more attention to moral values in economic relations.

Over time, the concept of moral economy has been adopted and applied in a wide range of settings. For example, Manning & Browne (2022) use an institutional approach to study comparative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier responses to prisoners of war to show that periods of crisis and stress can reveal hidden aspects of moral economies. Their analysis focuses on the importance of social imaginaries in explaining different responses to crises. Within scholarship on industrial relations, it has provided a rich seam for analysis; for example, it has framed an account of a campaign against factory closure by clothing workers employed at a plant situated in Ynyswen, Treorchy, in the Rhondda valleys of South Wales (Jenkins, 2017). This rich ethnography shows how the factory closure was instigated by the clothing company Burberry moving production overseas to reduce production costs, while the workers viewed this as a betrayal of their community. In effect the workers campaign against the closure ar-

gued that the company had no moral right to close the factory. Another application of moral economy that views it as an interconnection of affect-saturated values in a close functional relationship has been used by Lorraine Daston (1995) to analyse the practices of science in terms of norms, ideologies and fields. More recently, the concept has informed accounts of attempts to construct alternative food systems in different institutional settings that are based on foundational economy principles (Morgan, 2020).

Perhaps one of the most imaginative and controversial uses of the concept is that of James C. Scott's (1976) application to the lives of South East Asian peasants. Scott was trying to express an understanding of what was being violated by colonial exploitation. He focused on the peasant sense of justice and social equity and how this, rather than previously assumed crude motivations of hunger and material deprivation, drove their rebellions. Scott's focus was on everyday acts of resistance, and he concluded that the moral economy had two defining characteristics. In the first instance he viewed it as historically situated in a pre-market society world. In addition to this he viewed it as socially restricted to the dominated and oppressed, the peasants and workers. In this way he saw the concept as providing a means of analysing historical change and inequality in contemporary societies. However, his account has been criticised for presenting an over-romanticised view of the past as a means of critiquing the present.

With this in mind it is important to understand that the concept of moral economy has descriptive (is) and prescriptive (ought) elements to it (Arnold, 2001; Sayer, 2007). In descriptive terms it analyses the effects of norms and values on everyday life while in the prescriptive form it refers to value judgements about principles and how they apply to economic processes, social goods, and emancipatory aims. Here, the moral economy is a system of norms and obligations guiding action and principles of recognition and distribution (Honneth, 1995, 2016). Drawing on Granovetter's (1985, 1992, 2016) corpus of work, Barbera (2023) has identified a blurring between these two positions where empirical analysis of the moral economy and arguments for a moralised economy interact. These insights are reflected in Andrew Sayer's (2005, 2018, 2023) emphasis on moral economy as a basis for developing a critical political economy. By moral economy he refers to the position that sees economic institutions being based on norms that in turn lead to expectations of moral behaviour by individuals and groups; behaviours that have ethical consequences. If political economy is to advance as critique, Sayer argues, its focus must be on the consequences of economic relations and organisations for wellbeing. Sayer (2023) has used this approach to examine rentierism and the ideology of a property owning democracy. In doing so he draws out the relationship between rentierism and rising inequality and the environmental crisis. Applying the framework to an analysis of welfare, Sayer (2018) focuses on the harms (and benefits) that ensue from neoliberalism. This moves the analytical gaze away from levels of incomes that individuals and households have under different welfare policies to the economic relations that underpin these. In doing so Sayer distinguishes between earner income, income transfers, and unearned income with the latter being viewed as dysfunctional with no ethical justification.

These analyses illustrate an approach to moral economy as a form of inquiry that unpicks how economic activities are structured and influenced by morals and how ethics and norms are in turn influenced by economic relations. Thus, economic processes are socially embedded and influenced by norms, habits, conventions, and values and these cannot be understood by abstracting them from cultural and social relations. Capitalism is dependent on non-market forms of coordination and social reproduction (Fraser, 2013) Moreover, as we will see later, economic behaviour involves not only valuations of worth use and exchange but also moral

valuations.

The moral economy also has a temporal aspect. As Will Davies (2017) points out, a key failure of the neoliberal project is found in the ways in which it embeds the future into contemporary market conditions. If the moral economy includes the analysis of how economic institutions (which are assumed to be amoral) are normatively and politically instituted then we need to pay attention to how debt, credit risks and derivatives are monetised in the present. Davies argues that the current dominant paradigm prevents or at least hampers alternative futures based on long-term, often difficult financial calculus. If we are to invest in future generations, he argues, “Anthropocene utopias” are required. This argument rests on the view that the split between economic value and social value is less clear than neoliberal ideology suggests. The promises of market amorality are failed promises and as Boltanski & Thevenot (1991) suggest, there is a role for sociology in exposing the assumed neutrality in present and future values of worth. We have argued elsewhere that a foundational economy perspective can provide the tools for undertaking such an analysis by forensically examining the distributive impacts of existing and future economic arrangements (Barbera & Jones, 2020; Calafati et al., 2023).

Although Adam Smith is more commonly cited in support of the self-interested invisible hand of markets, Sayer (2015) points out that he simultaneously developed a theory of moral sentiments, emphasising that people are both economically and psychologically linked, and sentiments are evaluations of what affects actors’ well-being. Within neo-liberalism, inequalities and the moral standing of the rich are justified by reference to judgements of failure and success that underpin the corrosion of character (Sayer, 2015). For the rich, primary goals include accumulation of external rather than internal goods, the appropriation of credit due to others, evasion of responsibilities, and abandonment of commitments and pledges. Social relations are driven by instrumental imperatives, impression management, avoidance of weak people, and integration with those perceived as strong. Critique, in order to expose the consequences of such behaviours as well as forms of domination, exploitation and misrecognition for human flourishing and suffering must itself be rooted in an understanding of morals and ethics. There must therefore be a focus both on the norms and sentiments that frame economic practices and the understandings that legitimate these practices. It is this insight that informs the discussion of failure in this paper, and we argue that it should form the basis of any analysis of failure; be that in the fields of economic organisation, innovation, art, culture, or politics.

3 Moral Economy of Failure

One way of approaching the moral economy of failure is to focus on how the conditions of late modernity comprise reward systems that are skewed to a tiny elite. Under such winner takes all circumstances, failure is both normal and detrimental. As set out in Boltanski & Chiapello’s (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, through the interweaving of personal identity with economic achievement, failure leads to shame and emotional pain that can erode our confidence and sense of self as moral persons. The consequences of shame, humiliation and status anxiety are doubly felt for those who, because of their deemed personal failures, are caught within a web of increased surveillance monitoring that is a feature of modern welfare systems.

As Appadurai & Alexander (2019) note, failure is felt to be ubiquitous in modern societies and yet it remains a broad and ill-defined concept that is context-dependent and historically and culturally contingent. Within elites networks, failure escapes approbation by means of different forms of washing (green washing, astroturfing, dissembling, and hype) while it can also be framed as a necessary part of technological advancement (particularly in the growing fields of

AI and nanotechnology) where the phrase “fail early fail often” has become a kind of mantra. In this latter sense failure has become a badge of honour within the circles of financial and technological capitalism as it chimes with Schumpeterian ideas of risk, innovation, and creative destruction; failure becomes an asset (Birla, 2016). Indeed, the double standards of failure have a dark side where it is used to punish and dominate those parts of society that are subject to moral opprobrium. Saskia Sassen (2016) has developed the idea of a paradox of failure to illustrate how it is viewed as a “good” in certain fields such as design, where it is denied or masked or “washed” to disguise its effects on vulnerable groups in society. In contrast, she argues, other fields and parts of the world are subjected to the full disciplinary might of global institutions who have the power to define failure, evaluate its extent and depth, postulate its causes, and instigate remedial measures.

Practices of valuation are increasingly important in many aspects of policy and welfare and constitute an expanding research field which resonates with the sociology of failure (Peetz et al., 2023). As we saw at the outset, evaluation systems can have devastating effects on individuals and groups that are subject to their control. These can take the form of scoring systems that are increasingly being determined by algorithms and AI and manifest themselves in job applications, credit scores, social credits, insurance assessments and risk of crime. There is now a strong body of evidence showing the potential of these systems to profile poor, black, and marginalised communities negatively and to reinforce the impact of system failures on vulnerable groups. Sociologists have also identified negative and unintended consequences of the use of ranking systems in institutional settings (such as schools, universities, and hospitals). These can lead to measurement fixation and tunnel vision but also gaming of systems and manipulation of data (Exworthy et al., 2019). Target-setting may lead to a measure becoming unstable and, in some cases, subject to Campbell’s law where the use of a quantitative measure for social decision-making distorts the processes the indicator is intended to monitor. Where there is a plurality of valuation systems, actors may use a pick and mix approach, ignoring some and embracing others. These examples point to statements about failure being value judgements in themselves and signal the importance of a moral economy approach to understanding surveillance in different valuation systems. In effect a research agenda for failure should focus on the norms and sentiments that underpin social and economic practices and how these practices are legitimated.

As Catherine Alexander (2023) shows, the embrace of failure by Silicon Valley, technological determinists and private equity investors incorporates a double standard where failures among the rich, successful and young are incorporated into heroic, valorised narratives of resilience while serving as a mark of uselessness and hopeless incompetence for those outside their groupings. Alexander adopts an anthropological approach to view failure as a value regime, as an ethnographic category, as an end point, and as a form of transfer (where failure is allocated from the powerful to the dominated and oppressed). Social science research has tended to centre attention on responses to failure, on resilience and moments before recovery. In contrast Downer (2011) sets out a constructivist approach to failure as an alternative to realist epistemology based on a category of man-made calamity: the “epistemic accident”. An associated attempt to develop a general theory of failure (Jeevendrampillai et al., 2017) brings its gaze on material cultures and views points of failure in terms of material behaving differently to what is expected; a moment between present and anticipated future. This has a moral component in that what ought to have happened doesn’t occur. In these terms, failure and success are not binary opposites. Failure is relational, a moral accusation, a devaluation, and a moment in time when a process of objectification is interrupted or aborted. Finally, failure can also

be viewed in terms of its revelatory capacities. Moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, brought systemic failures into the open and highlighted a range of issues that were either ignored or glossed over. But this revelatory component may also be present in infrastructure failures, in the financial collapse of businesses and corporations, and for some, in the complexity of modern innovation systems such as smart cities which exist on the edge of failure (Thompson et al., 2020). In the next sections we try to apply these insights to three key areas of concern. First, a discussion of organisational and professional failures and attempts to develop explanatory understandings of failure. Second, failures in markets, governance, and policy. Finally, we address failures in innovation and experimentalism. In each case we consider how a moral economy framework can provide a better understanding of the consequences of failure and the basis for failure judgements.

3.1 Organisational and Professional Failures

Sociologist Diane Vaughan (2021) uses the term “normalisation of deviance” to describe how irregular or aberrant forms of behaviour become normalised and accepted within organisations and in corporate culture. This process can work over a long period of time with warnings about the behaviour and its consequences being ignored, misdiagnosed, or missed. Vaughan’s work was based on an analysis of the events behind the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986, but the concept has been picked up in a range of different settings from the airline industry to medical errors and system failure in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is interesting to note that a slightly different treatment of failure and catastrophe is found in Bruno Latour’s (2005) account of the space shuttle Columbia in 2003 as an event that reveals the hidden networks (NASA, government, and military) behind the failure of the object once assumed to be the space shuttle itself. A related approach can be found in the way the Foundational Economy collective has focused on failures in core reliance systems. These systems are defined as services that meet human needs and capabilities and include housing, food, water, transportation, and energy, as well as health and social care. Failures in reliance systems have a range of negative effects including environmental degradation and the reinforcement of forms of oppression including exploitation, marginalisation, and powerlessness. Using Perrow’s (1984) early work on “normal accidents,” the collective unpick the vulnerabilities of the UK’s National Health Service to failure during the COVID-19 crisis and focus on the lack of buffering within the system (Froud et al., 2020) it used. Referring to this as a “reliance system failure,” they highlight how complex and fragile systems are inherently unpredictable in terms of their response to disruption and crisis. Where systems have been stretched and lack buffer capacity or shock absorption, they become less able to respond to proliferating failures and consequently suffer amplification effects. Describing failures of healthcare, Dawn Goodwin (2021) shows how failures are often framed as catastrophe stories that are in one sense a valorisation of individual histories, and in another sense a common source of teaching and learning within different professional groups (similar methods of dealing with mistakes and failure can be found in the fields of management, engineering, social work, and medicine). Sociological work on these disaster stories has revealed how they help socialise professional groups. Within their story-telling there are clear messages emphasising humility, teamwork, and the importance of mutual learning. In this way, they are key methods for acquiring tacit knowledge and reinforcing behavioural norms. We suggest that a moral economy of failure can offer new insights into the consequences of normalised deviance for different groups in society, insight into the impact of reliance system failures on services to address human needs, and how catastrophe stories have uneven effects in different

professional settings.

3.2 Failure of Markets, State and Policy

There is a large and long-standing literature on market failures, governmental responses, and policy interventions. This literature follows and influences long-term experiments in the introduction of market forces into health, education, and welfare policies across the globe. Many of these experiments have drawn inspiration from behavioural economics, and while many of these experiments have been unsuccessful the ideas that underpin them still have an important hold over policy makers in the nexus of government and private sector actors. An important counterweight is the work of Samuel Bowles (2016; Bowles & Gintis, 1998), who has drawn on the concept of moral economy and clear examples of policy failures to develop a critique of the dominant paradigm of *homo economicus*. Using examples such as an attempt to improve parental pick up times at a nursery by means of financial incentives, he highlights a potential negative synergy between moral behaviour and economic incentives that crowds out good behaviour. The great experiment in market-based welfare policies has promoted property rights, market competition, and increased use of monetary incentives as solutions to inefficiencies, bureaucracy, and lack of choice. However, by drawing on a moral economy perspective, Bowles shows that these policies undermine civic culture, cooperative citizens and social norms underpinning conviviality. His critique goes further to suggest that, ultimately, the failures of such policy interventions may damage markets themselves. Similar arguments that draw on evidence for moral limits to markets have been put forward by Michael Sandel (2013), Debra Satz (2010) and John O'Neill (1998). Although each approaches the problem from a different perspective, they emphasise the need for greater democracy and dialogue surrounding decision-making on public goods, identifying sectors where market-based thinking does not belong and recognising that economics is a poor guide to answering many of dilemmas of welfare.

One of the ways market and state failures have been addressed is by policy turns towards civil society and third-sector organisations (Zuidervaart, 1998). The role of civil society organisations has in the past been explained in relation to government failure theory (Weisbrod, 1986). Specifically, they are seen as “filling in” for government failure in sectors of collective consumption goods. However, this begs the question as to why civil society organisations operate in other sectors of the economy. Contract failure theory (Hansmann, 1987) suggests that the expectation of market failure stimulates the entry of civil society organisations into a range of sectors. These approaches might explain entry into a sector but don't help unpick poor performance by civil society and voluntary organisations within a sector. In addition, they don't account for other drivers and motivations, for example ideological commitment to care and love for others that might stimulate civil society organisations, particularly religiously based ones, to deliver services. Voluntary failure theory (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016; Salamon, 1995) offers a more comprehensive approach that draws in political and social aspects. Instead of seeing government as the main response to market failures in welfare, this analysis sees non-profits and the voluntary sector as reactive in the first instance. Even here however, the assumption is that third-sector and voluntary organisations are, in the main, a response to a failure of market and government in the first instance. Alternative explanations point to civil society organisations existing because of other, mission-based, motivations, including the need to care for others, charitable giving, and common goals and activities. They exist, not because of governmental and market failures but because of a commitment to social justice and a drive to protect the vulnerable. Indeed, civil society organisations across different sectors, from the arts, to welfare,

and to education, draw support because of their commitment to these principles. It follows that some civil society organisations are closely aligned with the normative perspectives of a social and solidarity economy which in turn implies alternatives to the failures of markets and government (Brodiez-Dolino, 2018; Gibson-Graham, 2014; M. Thompson, 2020). In light of this, it is perhaps useful to think about different forms of failure including governance failure, policy failure, and systems failure. The idea of governance failure stems from Bob Jessop's (1999) work, which critiqued modes of governance that were perceived by many as solutions to the Scylla and Charybdis of market failure and state failure. Jessop, however, questioned this optimistic view of governance, suggesting instead that there was an inevitability to governance failure. Deepening his analysis, he delineated the contradictions of metagovernance, the governance of governance, and the dilemmas and contradictions this entailed. Applying this body of criticism to an analysis of civil society, Jessop (2017) argues that attempts to develop forms of heterarchic governance based on networks and solidarity are as exposed to failure as forms of governance based on hierarchy and command. With respect to policy failure, Etherington & Jones (2016) put meat on the bones of Jessop's abstract work by setting out, in detail, the repeated governance failures in UK policies — particularly those trying to address regional inequalities and how these can be better understood through a framing of governance.

3.3 Failure in Innovation and Experimentalism

The discussion so far has perhaps followed an overly pessimistic and nihilistic thread to some of these critiques. It is important to develop an analysis of failure that recognises the potential for innovations and experiments to have progressive and emancipatory potential while failing in different temporal and spatial contexts. Smil (2023), in his account of hype and failure in the fields of innovation and invention, points out that there is now a long-term criticism of historical accounts of technological failure that are linear and uni-directional. Instead, he argues that both success and failure should be viewed within a framework of social, economic, and political choices; in other words, he is calling for a political economy of failure. In doing so he presents a history of innovations under three broad categories. The first covers innovations that were energetically pursued, welcomed enthusiastically, and commercialised rapidly, though later were found to be failures in terms of their harms and negative effects. The examples he interrogates include lead in petrol (subsequently banned), the use of DDT (originally used for insect control), and the banning of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs — originally used in refrigerators). It is interesting to note that in the latter case the banning of CFCs has been described by Charles Sabel as a success story in terms of policies to address climate change. The second category analysed by Smil includes inventions which did not live up to their initial commercial promise. Here the examples he cites include airships for intercontinental travel, nuclear fission, and supersonic aircraft. His third and final category illustrates promissory failures. That is, expectations of inventions and innovations that are possible and known of but are yet to be realised in terms of reliable, safe, practical, and commercial implementation. Examples include high speed travel in a vacuum (so-called “hyperloops”), meeting the nitrogen demand of stable crops through symbiosis with nitrogen-fixing bacteria, and nuclear fusion. In each case, the innovations would be transformative for human health and well-being and environmental sustainability, so the failure he addresses is one of expectations. The analysis he develops through these different categories and examples provides insights into the social, political, and economic choices that frame innovation success and failure. Crucially, it provides a welcome note of scepticism with respect to exaggerated and uncritical reports of invention and innovation that are ubiquitous

within contemporary accounts of technological and scientific progress, but also holds the door open for innovations that can address human needs in sustainable, equitable and emancipatory ways. This raises the question of where failure sits within experimentalist thought and prefigurative politics (Morgan & Sabel, 2019).

Scholars and activists have turned to experimentalist ideas to address a range of contemporary political, economic and environmental crises as reflected in Bernard Harcourt's (2020), the Gibson-Graham call for an "economic ethics for the Anthropocene" (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010), and in Axel Honneth's (2020) potential "paths of renewal" that draw on pragmatic alternatives based on historical experimentalism. Some of these ideas draw on the pragmatic experimentalism of John Dewey (Wills & Lake, 2020) and Roberto Unger's (2020) experimentalist thought. As we have noted, in parallel with such work, new perspectives on reliance systems (the core systems that people depend on for meeting human needs, freedoms, and capabilities) highlight their importance for resilience and resistance to negative environmental effects and forms of oppression including exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness (Schafran et al., 2020). These ideas have influenced thinking across different research disciplines, social movements, and prefigurative practices and cover Local Experimentalism, Foundational Economy experiments, Experimentalist Governance, Active Citizenship, Deliberative Democracy and Participatory Methods. While experiments may often fail, we argue that an analysis of such initiatives should draw on a moral economy approach. For example, experimental governance is being considered as a form of multi-level organization that involves continuous learning (Morgan & Sabel, 2019) and as a basis for place based social innovation projects (Morgan, 2018). There are also examples of experimentalist thinking being taken forward with respect to conviviality and alternative ways of co-existing (Adloff, 2020; Convivialist/International, 2020). This thinking has influenced a prefigurative politics, for example through radical practices that can renew the right to the city (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2021), local communes (Azzellini, 2018), and commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2013). The question that arises from a moral economy of failure perspective is which frameworks and methods allow us to explore the transformative potential, scalability and generalisability of social innovations and how do we adapt and learn from the failures that occur in these attempts to innovate and change (Berti et al., 2021)?

4 Conclusion

We began this paper with a quotation from David Edgerton's (2019) *Rise and Fall of the British Nation*, where he calls for an archive of failure to be built to enable scholars to study futures. Our paper has attempted to outline a moral economy of failure and examined a number of fields and sectors from within this perspective. These include organisational and professional failures, market failures and failures of governance and policy, and failures in innovation and experimentalism. Several scholars have indicated a potential agenda for researching failure. Apadurai (2016) for example has recommended a focus on judgements of failure; how they are made, who has authority to make the judgement, who is affected by the judgement. Others have focused on regimes of failure as an assemblage established to identify failure and act on it (Kurunmäki et al., 2023). While these are useful starting points, we believe that a research agenda also needs to take account of social and economic practices that form the moral basis of failure regimes. Our discussion highlights a double standard with respect to failure. For some, generally the wealthy and powerful, it is possible to embrace failure; to hold it up as an example of one's capacity to adapt, to survive to embrace new ideas and through individual re-

silence, and to learn and grow from the experience. But in other circumstances, particularly for those living in poverty, for marginal groups and for the racially profiled, failure attracts shame, stigma, and punishment. Accounts of failure take the form of different narratives that can both inform learning moments and hide the impact of failure, as well as shift blame away from some to others. Failures in markets, policy, and governance are ubiquitous, and for some analysts are as present in democratic networks as they are in hierarchical and oppressive systems. Socio-historical analyses of innovations and inventions, however, can provide insights into the processes that lead to failure. Attempts to address contemporary political, economic, and environmental crises that draw on progressive understandings of experimentalism and social innovation therefore need to be rooted in a moral economy of failure.

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