Introduction: Failed! The Sociological Analysis of Failure

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Abstract

In recent years the social sciences have been paying closer attention to failure, to its manifestations in the contemporary world and to the modalities of dealing with it both in theory and in practice. An emergent and interdisciplinary field of analysis has been consolidating under the label of failure studies reflecting a number of social trends. These include the instability of winner-take-all systems, the ubiquity of the new spirit of capitalism, metric-based forms of governmentality, platformization, and changes in cultural attitudes to failure. We argue that the normality of failure calls for a better conceptualization of it. What is needed is a clearer thinking about what failure really means, a better understanding of the mechanisms that generate, reproduce, and terminate it as a normal part of life. The essays collected for this symposium offer fresh insights on the analysis of failure. Taking different areas of social life as a focus, they critically examine the failures of large complex socio-technical systems; the purposefully agency of players in systems failure; the failures of governance and metagovernance; new meanings of policy failures; kaleidoscopic failure; network failure and the moral economy of failure. In doing so they we suggest that a sociology of failure needs to be built on socio-historical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments.

Keywords: Failure; Winner takes all; Capitalism; Normality; Power.

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Introduction

Nearly 30 years ago, Malpas and Wickham (1995) observed that sociologists get it wrong when viewing failure as "a temporary breakdown within the system" (p. 38). Failure is neither temporary, nor is it a breakdown. It is a continuous state of normal working of the system: *deficio ergo sum* is the paradigmatic expression of failure. Failure is not just normal, it is also far more common than success and only some kind of bias — conceptual, epistemic, cognitive, or ideological — may obscure this basic fact. Success is easy to observe, while failure require an extra-effort. We easily see successful start-uppers but we do not see so clearly the entire population of contenders and the myriad of losses covering the process that produces a handful of winners. Only about one in 1,000 turtles survive to adulthood. Hatchlings die of dehydration if they do not make it to the ocean fast enough, not to speak of animals of prey killing them. For turtles, failure is *normal* in a Durkheimian sense: it is the way the system they live in works as such. These basic considerations have been neglected for too long in the analysis of failure, which focused on various sub-topics unified by the belief that failure is the *exception*, not the rule, of the way things work in a continuous and smooth way. From this presumption, the analysis of failure alternatively underlined the "unexpected consequences" of failure, the "intelligence" of failure (Sitkin, 1992), or its role as a change-maker (Ellis & Davidi, 2005) that governs action.

The closest look at the normality of failure is to be found in organizational studies (Perrow, 1999; Vaughan, 1996), where failure is conceived as the consequence of the normal way of working of the system. Still, even in these precursor studies, failure was conceived as a breakdown, a disaster, or a rupture. It was not the ubiquitous condition of the system. To include the ubiquity of failure, the concept of *permanently failing* organizations first developed by Meyer and Zucker (1986) is key. The study asserted that the continued survival of underperforming firms is contingent on serving the interests of certain internal and external actors who have come to replace the purely economic interests of shareholders and owners (Rao, 1990). Still, the source of the "permanent failure" was found in the surrounding organizational field and not in the way the organizational system works *per se*. A close conception was later developed by Schrank and Whitford (2011) within the framework of the network failures, framed as continuous, rather than discrete, outcomes.

More recently, social sciences have been paying a closer attention to failure, to its manifestations in the contemporary world and to the modalities of dealing with it both in theory and in practice (Mica et al., 2023a; 2023b). An emergent and interdisciplinary field of analysis has been consolidating under the label of *failure studies* and the pervasive anti-failure bias denounced by Malpas and Wickham is vanishing. This growing and quickly consolidating interest for failure is due to a number of factors, such as: i) the "failure of excellence", namely the shaky foundations of a winners-take-all society where few super-champions get the largest part of the resources/rewards (Cook & Frank, 2010); ii) the ubiquity of the "new spirit of capitalism", where personal identity of agents and their economic performance are intertwined in an "entrepreneurial" project-based logic (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005); iii) the growing interest in the analysis of governmentality effects and the critical assessment of metric-based power (Beer, 2016); iv) the diffusion of creative industries and performance-based jobs (Elberse, 2013); v) the narrowing of good jobs and the provision and platformization of labor markets (Kalleberg, 2016); and vi) the decline of the social stigma against failure, namely the "mundanization" of failure and the growth of failure tolerance (Brendan & Hughes, 2006).

Thanks to these and perhaps other factors, the failure of imagination in the social sciences concerning the conception of failure is evaporating. Failure is no more a temporary breakdown

of the system. It is neither a rare phenomena, nor is it the permanent but unintended outcome of a complex set of practices and conventions of a variety of actors from within and outside the organization. Failure is embedded in the way the system ordinarily works *per se*. It is not a dichotomous variable confined in a precise sector of field and it manifests ordinarily in a nuance of *discrete states* at multiple levels. Moreover — from the discursive and symbolic viewpoint — it is a mundane fact endowed with *moral recognition*. Accordingly, organizations, artistic fields, big-tech complex, governance regimes and even the "alternative" economies in the production and distribution of goods and services need to deal with the normality of failure in a threefold sense; failure is endogenously normal, ubiquitous, and morally legitimate.

The normality of failure calls for a better conceptualization of it, for there is a resounding recognition that a clear understanding of failure remains elusive. What is needed is a clearer thinking about what failure really means, a better understanding of the mechanisms that generate, reproduce and terminate it *as a normal way of working of the system*. The essays collected for this symposium offer fresh insights on the analysis of failure from this perspective.

The symposium opens with the essay by Diane Vaughan (2023), a key scholar of organizational failure studies. Vaughan's essay assumes that failures and harmful outcomes are not restricted to a particular type of organizational field, form, or function. She looks at the failures of *large complex socio-technical systems* through a cross-case comparison of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Space Shuttle Program and the Federal Aviation Administration's National Airspace System (NAS). The second essay, by Janet A. Vertesi and danah boyd (2023), starts from a cognitive twist: failure may not be just an unintended consequence, on the contrary it can be a *purposeful agency* of players who restrict sociomaterial resources to push their respective systems toward failure. The aim is reconfiguring the resulting agencies along politically expedient lines to the brink of failure through the strategic withholding of resources. The third essay, by Martin Jones (2023), deals with the failures of governance and metagovernance. It starts from the concept of *spaces of collibration*, taken initially from the work of Andrew Dunsire and developed by Bob Jessop, to critically get behind how uneven development and state intervention in sub-national economic development is managed by creating an *unstable equilibrium of compromise*, which in turn helps to the explain the governance of failure. The fourth essay, by Adriana Mica, Mikołaj Pawlak, and Paweł Kubicki (2023b), explores how new meanings of policy failures enact new expectations in relation to policymaking. The redefinition of failure in terms of *ignorance* and *social injustice* entails oppression risks and social justice costs. This happens, as they show, especially on the terrain of politicized and polarized policymaking, where the introduction of new changes in the name of emancipation may occur to the detriment of social groups that do not have a dominant position. The fifth contribution is from Rachel Skaggs (2023) and it is built on the concept of *kaleidoscopic failure* made of thousands of points of potential for failure along a number of relevant dimensions. Skaggs shows how failure is a normal reality in the arts, yet it is felt individually and can lead artists to self-doubt, low motivation, blocks in creativity, or to them exiting the field altogether. Bernd Bonfert (2023), in the sixth essay, considers the causes, dynamics, and intensity of *network failure* as the partial dysfunctions and underperformance in alternative food networks, as well as the inability to realize their collaborative potential. In a sense, it matches an alternative conceptualization of failure to the failure of an alternative way of organizing food production and distribution. Finally, Filippo Barbera and Ian Rees Jones (2023) review different understandings of moral economy and their applications across different political, economic, and cultural contexts. Following this, they examine the literature on failure in different spaces including failure of markets, valuation regimes, innovations, markets, governance, policy and democratic

experimentalism. The essay argues that a moral economy of failure needs to be built on socio-historical understandings of failure in different contexts, cultures, and environments.

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