



Katharina Motyl, Regina Schober (eds.)

# THE FAILED INDIVIDUAL

*Amid Exclusion, Resistance, and the  
Pleasure of Non-Conformity*



**campus**



## The Failed Individual

*Dr. Katharina Motyl* is a research fellow in American Studies at the Collaborative Research Center “Threatened Order. Societies under Stress” of the University of Tübingen, Germany.

*Dr. Regina Schober* is Assistant Professor at the American Studies Department of the University of Mannheim, Germany.

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*Katharina Motyl and Regina Schober, July 2017*



# Introduction: The Failed Individual

*Susanne Hamscha, Katharina Motyl, and Regina Schober*

“If there is one thing in this world that I hate, it’s losers. I despise them,” then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declared to a group of high school students, expressing a firm belief in success and failure as the results of individual action and ambition (cf. Halberstam 2011, 5). Himself embodying the American Dream as an immigrant who “made it big in America,” Schwarzenegger demeaned the worth of individuals he perceived to be “losers,” and thus echoed an attitude prevalent in contemporary Western neoliberal politics that glorifies success as the only valuable way of being in the world and as the ultimate goal of one’s existence. Those who fail, the cultural myth goes, lack the determination and the will to work harder, run faster, and jump higher than those who succeed. This crude simplification of success and failure veils the fact that “winning” and “losing” do not merely depend on individual action or choice, but are actually enabled by an intricate web of power dynamics and regulatory regimes. Yet, the media strategy that the 45th U.S. president Donald J. Trump deployed during the 2016 GOP primaries and general election campaign attests to the political and cultural purchase that the winner– vs. loser-narrative holds for a significant part of the U.S. populace: a critical analysis of Trump’s tweets and campaign speeches reveals that he leveled the term *loser* at anyone who had dared critique him (the list includes political opponents such as Ted Cruz, media outlets such as *The Huffington Post*, and public personae such as Rosie O’Donnell),<sup>1</sup> which from a constructivist perspective attests to the contingent nature of the success/failure-binary. Yet, many of his voters apparently bought into his self-stylization as a successful businessman, who had the right to demean others as “losers,” the ultimate proof of the latter’s failure being their diminutive wealth when compared to Trump’s vast fortune.

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1 For a comprehensive compilation of those Trump has branded “losers” in tweets, see Estepa 2017.

The significance of the individual in the political culture and value system of the United States is historically and globally unparalleled. It is hardly surprising that the nation whose master narrative, the American Dream, professes a belief in the power of individual agency should have developed one of the most neoliberal economic orders in the world. However, the belief in the nexus of ambition and success entails that those who fail are seen as responsible for their lot—they must not have worked hard enough, the logic goes. This view, of course, obscures that a set of social structures, hegemonic norms, and discursive strategies influences whether an individual will attain success or fail, or even be defined as a winner or a loser. But the economic is merely one stage on which individuals may fail, since failure, which originally meant breaking in business, came to signify a deficient self as capitalism developed over the course of the nineteenth century, thus becoming an identity (Sandage 2005, 10–17).

This book aims at scrutinizing the many ways in which individuals fail economically, politically, socially, physically, or culturally, as well as the often contradictory discourses that have arisen around individual failure. It thus provides revealing insights into the power of hegemonic structures and discourses and the pressure to meet normative ideals, the various human and non-human actors involved in what we usually consider “human failure,” but also into the productive potential and the pleasures failure has to offer. The volume is testimony to and part of an emerging interest in failure in both media and academic discourses, reflecting a growing unease many of us feel in view of the pressures and cost of our performance culture. Recent years have seen an increase in attempts to demystify the taboo and stigma attached to individual failure. Most noticeably, perhaps, American entrepreneurial culture started celebrating business failures in so-called “Fuckup Nights,” a trend that was rapidly adopted on the other side of the Atlantic, as well—however, in conforming with neoliberal discourse, the emphasis of these events is on how failure has been overcome and turned into an asset for future success (cf. Goodson 2015; Hägler 2015). At the same time, scholarly attention has recently turned to failure as a critical category from a variety of perspectives, shedding light on the historical, political, and social circumstances that render individual failure a contingent concept generated, maintained, and negotiated through (conflicting) cultural narratives.

The fact that we often associate failure with economic loss, for example, is rooted in a specific Western narrative of individual accountability. In

*Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005), Scott A. Sandage traces the genesis of failure as a denominator of a deficient self back to the consolidation of capitalism in the nineteenth century. Arguing that failure is the foundation of the American Dream, rather than its dark side, he delineates how entrepreneurship became the primary model of American identity and how the notion of the “self-made man” suggested that the individual could be managed like a business that is run by risk, investment, profit, and loss. Prior to the nineteenth century, failure had referred to sinful behavior and other mistakes. Failure was “an incident, not an identity,” nothing that would make or unmake a man (Sandage 2005, 11). Sandage draws on Max Weber, who famously stated that striving for success was a compulsory virtue—if not a sacred duty—in American culture. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Weber cites from the writings of Benjamin Franklin to illustrate that Puritan ethics and ideas influenced the development of capitalism and that a capitalist spirit had existed in the United States long before a capitalist economic order had been established. In his analysis of Franklin’s writings, Weber concludes that the former’s moral attitudes and virtuousness are colored with utilitarianism: “Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues” (Weber 1992, 52). Virtues are only virtues when they benefit the individual; it would be simplifying matters, however, to assume that Franklin’s utilitarianism was an expression of egotism and egocentrism. As a Calvinist, Franklin believed that the acquisition of money was “the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling,” Weber notes, and “this peculiar idea ... is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalist culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it. It is an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity” (1992, 54).

In *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville famously observed that ambition was the universal feeling in America and that the necessity not to sink in the world pervaded the young republic (730). Tocqueville’s assessment points to a capitalist ethos which the individual was born into, as Weber would later note, and which presented itself to the individual as “an unalterable order of things in which he must live” (Weber 1992, 54). As a result, Sandage states, “life, ambition, and the pursuit of happiness” became the guiding principles of men in the nineteenth century, the “striver’s ethic” considered to be “the best of all possible freedoms” (2005, 14).

The flipside of the coin is, of course, that the duty of economic success, as Weber argues, “forces the individual ... to conform to capitalistic rules of action” and that those who act counter to those rules will “inevitably be eliminated from the economic scene” and “thrown into the streets without a job” (1992, 54–55). In other words: they will fail.

As success became mythically embodied in the American Dream and Manifest Destiny ideologies, implying an immediate link between ambition and reward, or between moral rectitude and monetary fortune, failure came to signify a depraved and shameful existence, which, crucially, had been self-inflicted. For most people, to use J. Jack Halberstam’s words, recognizing that “success is the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class, and gender” (2011, 3) is much harder to do than giving in to the “mass delusion” that success is a matter of attitude and that there really is no good excuse for an individual to fail (Ehrenreich 2009, 13). The fallacy of such a blind subscription to the Western success ideology is what Lauren Berlant in her eponymous study (2011) has called the “cruel optimism” of our attachment “to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds” (2). Berlant diagnoses a growing gap between “postwar optimism for democratic access to the good life” and the increasingly fraying fantasies of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy” (3) in Western post-1945 culture. The ensuing affect of “cruel optimism” thus potentially involves the invisible failure to achieve what one desires as well as the visible failure of coherent experience.

“So what is the alternative?” Halberstam asks in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) in consideration of such a perceived dilemma between cynical resignation and naïve optimism towards the dictate of “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society that equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2011, 2). Borrowing from queer theory, Halberstam dismantles the normative implications of the binary of success and failure. If the pursuit of a supposedly successful life is too wearing so as to become a curse, we may rather want to ask: “What kinds of reward can failure offer us?” (3). “Under certain circumstances,” Halberstam suggests, “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Failure can

thus become a field not only of evading “the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” but of active resistance against heteropatriarchy, the capitalist imperative to accumulate, and other forms of disciplinary power. Failure, seen in this light, can become a “counterintuitive mode [...] of knowing” (Halberstam 2011, 11), a “refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and [...] a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (12).

While failure has often been neglected in the American success narrative, it is perhaps for exactly that reason that it has always had a firm place in the American cultural imaginary. In *Failure and the American Writer* (2014), Gavin Jones demonstrates that failure has emerged as one of the major tropes in American fiction. “If the New England jeremiad was America’s ‘first distinctive literary genre’,” Jones asserts, “then we can say that American literary identity was born from an overwhelming sense of decline” (12). In discussing failure as both “a kind of aesthetic practice and literary identity,” Jones shows how American literature, especially since the nineteenth century, has been fundamentally shaped by the rhetoric of and a growing discourse surrounding failure, ranging from anxieties concerning religious and moral failure to exceptionalist ideologies of freedom, economic success, and social integrity. In American literature, Jones argues, failure has developed into “a process of thinking, knowing, feeling, and being,” and “becomes essential to an understanding of what makes us human—both within and beyond the pressures of social context” (13).

The present collection of essays is a comprehensive endeavor to provide an interdisciplinary and systematic exploration of the significance and meanings of individual failure in U.S. cultural history. In addition, by exploring failure through the lens of the individual, the essays in this collection show the complex and often contradictory ways in which discourses and mechanisms of failure affect individual experience, and highlight the ambivalences of individualism, and thus, of a central tenet of U.S. political culture and modern Western value systems. The book brings into conversation the theoretical approaches of critical race theory, queer studies, and disability studies with posthumanist and new media theory. By combining the former theoretical fields’ attention to particular vulnerabilities (“Which structures disadvantage individuals with certain subject positions?”) with the universalist concerns of posthumanism (“Which developments and circumstances impact every individual’s

agency?”), this collection is able to explore individual failure as embedded in diverse cultural, historical, and narrative contexts, thus emphasizing the contingent and ultimately transient nature of this abstract and loaded concept.

This book's first objective is to historicize, denaturalize, and deconstruct the rhetoric that underlies the success/failure-binary. The essays in the collection critically examine the norms, structures, and media dispositifs that function as stepping stone for some individuals while acting as glass ceiling for others (e.g. structural racism, heteronormativity, or network access). Moreover, since in the zero-sum game of capitalism someone's success depends on someone else's failure, it seems all too necessary to ask how the failed individual is framed, disqualified, and punished for the sake of maintaining order and cultural legibility.

At the same time, American concepts of failure have been adopted across the globe. Neoliberal tenets of self-responsibility have spread far beyond the U.S., while advances in digital and biotechnology have rendered the U.S. an allegory for the “modern.” A second objective of the essay collection, thus, is to investigate how individuals' agency and subjectivity are impacted by an increasing technologization of life (e.g. surveillance, digital self-tracking, etc.), and by the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, which has resulted in variants of labor exploitation and precariousness in both the West and the Global South.

Critical posthumanism has refigured the human subject as only one node in a complex network of technological, economic, political, cultural, and historical influences instead of regarding it as a self-contained entity. The posthumanist shift brought about by reconceptualizations of the subject in response to information theory and cybernetics, as well as poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science, urges us to rethink notions of individual responsibility. Posthumanism radically challenges the idea of the autonomous individual in control, since, as N. Katherine Hayles states, “the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted” (2008, 288). An increased awareness of distributed cognition, object agency (Latour 2005), and human-machine interdependencies prompts us to rethink the success/failure-binary as well as its conditions. In an age in which knowledge and agency are increasingly contingent on digital data and machine operations, traditional beliefs in the individual's

free will (and thus, the ascription of success and failure to conscious choice) become more and more unstable.

As posthumanism has given rise to new models of subjectivity, it also affects the ways in which we conceptualize individual failure. Technology has always produced a success/failure-dialectic with respect to individual freedom. It has both fostered new anxieties regarding technodeterminist views that regard digital technology as totalizing and dehumanizing as well as yielded utopian projections of the new media as democratizing and liberating. For Herbert Marcuse, technological progress has produced a new form of “technological rationality” that is in accord with the imperative values of economic success: productivity, efficiency, and expediency (Marcuse 1982, 140–41). Our current new media environment raises pressing concerns regarding the freedom (and obligation) to succeed, not least because of the ever-growing demands of information management and social networking, an often elusive algorithmic agency, the potentials of “dataveillance” (Clarke 1988), and an increasingly centralized corporate control of the Internet. At the same time, there are more optimistic visions of resistance to hegemonic practices and modes of participation that the new media may offer. New modes of online subjectivity include concepts of the “fluid self” (Turkle 1995) as open to constant reinvention, decentered modes of subjectivity that constitute subjects as “unstable, multiple and diffuse” (Poster 2001, 81) as well as the “quantified self” with its promises (and normative pressures) of self-optimization (Lupton 2016).

However, this essay collection not only addresses the limiting and oppressive facets of failure; rather, its third objective is to inquire into the spaces of resistance, chaos, and pleasure failure opens up. As queer theory and disability studies have shown, failing to meet the norms of heterosexual reproduction and bodily productivity, respectively, liberates allegedly “failed” individuals from complying with the behavioral protocols dictated by these norms. Lee Edelman and others have argued polemically that queers have no future because their inability to biologically reproduce excludes them from national fantasies of striving for progress and improvement. Heteronormative societies are pervaded by a “repro ideology” (Warner 1991, 10), which denotes both a duty and a seemingly natural drive to reproduce so as to secure a future and guarantee that the body politic will survive. In this logic of reproductivity, queers are stigmatized as those who are not contributing to society’s future but rather embody the “social order’s death drive” (Edelman 2004, 3).

Analogous to the inability of queers to conform to normative patterns of desire and reproduction, the disabled seemingly fail to meet the standards of physical productivity and thus fundamentally challenge teleological, future-oriented conceptions of “success.” In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), Alison Kafer describes the general sentiment that disability needs to be avoided or at least tried to be cured as a sign that, in most people’s imagination, a life with disability is a life with no future. The value of a disability-free future seems self-evident, while the benefit of integrating disability into visions of a good, successful future is less so. Kafer suggests that a politics of “crip futurity” needs to insist that disabled lives are sustainable and needs to imagine disability as a valuable and integral human condition (3). Too often, our obedience to the future results in the framing of disability as failure, Kafer notes, whether it is in the context of institutionalizing individuals with disabilities, experimenting with bone-lengthening surgeries and growth attenuation, or other efforts to fix bodies and minds on the grounds that the disabled person and their community will enjoy a better future (29).

Queer and crip futurities seek to challenge heteronormative and ableist visions of the future by carving out the value of lives that seem to be situated outside a social order organized around re/productivity. The negative effects associated with failure—disappointment, pain, disillusionment, anxiety, despair—may form a productive counter-discourse to the ideology of positivity rampant in societies with a neoliberal economic order. Their supposedly bleak futures encourage queers and the disabled to forge alliances in the here and now, and to find meaning in their existence beyond the dictate of re/productivity. Already “doomed” to be failures, queers and the disabled may try to dislodge their existence from the normative regimes that govern individuals who subscribe to the narrative of futurity. Refusing the future altogether may grant queers and the disabled a greater degree of self-determination and agency than attempting to conform to dominant ideals. Moreover, as select contributions will demonstrate, individuals may strategically deploy failure as a means of resistance to exploitative structures; for instance, subcultural identities such as *drug addict* or *punk* may be read as expressions of resistance to the neoliberal imperative for productivity. In short, individuals who strategically fail to comply with exploitative structures may enjoy a greater degree of individuality than those governing themselves according to the norms that these regimes dictate.

The essays in this volume provide an interdisciplinary panorama of the philosophical underpinnings, complex dynamics, historical developments, aesthetic negotiations, and popular representations of individual failure in U.S. culture and in Western cultures at large. The essays in the first section, “Theoretical Perspectives on Failure,” examine some of the philosophical, cultural, and economic foundations of the ways in which the failed individual is framed and has emerged as a historically contingent concept, a product of cultural and political practice, as well as a theoretical concept.

Christopher Taylor, in “Sometimes You Just Fail: Protest and the Policing of Bad Feeling,” addresses the contemporary depathologization and normalization of failure as a mode of governing populations through the Long Crisis. Emptying failure of its pathos, Taylor argues, is functional for the containment of populations exposed to diminished life expectations and tendential expulsion from the circuits of capital. In his critical assessment of protest movements like Occupy Wall Street and the accompanying apparatuses of policing failed subjects, Taylor diagnoses a systemic flattening of the subjects’ affective response to failure, while calling for a new political activism that re-imbues failure with its devastating affect.

While Taylor’s analysis deploys a Marxist framework in which the economic constitutes the base and the realm of culture forms the superstructure, Bina Nir’s essay “The Primordial Failure: A Cultural-Philosophical Analysis” examines the “Western pursuit of success” in terms of its genealogy beyond the advent of capitalist consumer culture. Nir argues that Western conceptions of success and failure are cultural constructs deeply embedded in the roots of Western culture—in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament—and are not merely aftereffects or by-products of capitalist consumer culture.

Theory has also played a constitutive role in both challenging as well as confirming the ideologies and structural circumstances that govern definitions of individual success and failure. Hannes Lang and Eva Lang, in “Failure in Economics: A Black-Box,” critically examine neoclassical economic theory’s lack of engagement with failure as an analytical category. The recent financial crisis, they argue, has once more led to the questioning of current mainstream economic theories and its corresponding policies. However, not only have these theories failed to protect against or even predict the crisis, the concept of failure has still been largely neglected in economics. Lang and Lang show how economic theory has installed a

system that makes itself immune to the idea of failure in its overreliance on the concept of the *homo economicus*. They then demonstrate how this immunization can be disrupted by developing a new economic paradigm that takes into account political structures and the latest research in emerging fields such as behavioral economics and neuroeconomics.

The essays in the next section, “Determinants of Failure: Structures, Normativity, and Power,” further challenge the exclusive ascription of failure to individual responsibility by unraveling such political, normative, and ideological structures that have functioned as more or less invisible power laws in defining individual failure. In “Destined to Fail: Cosmetic Surgery, Female Body Images, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Birth-mark,’” Johannes Fehrle re-reads the American Renaissance author’s short story “The Birth-mark” in light of the death of the pornographic actress known as “Sexy Cora.” Both Hawthorne’s protagonist and Carolin Wosnitza, Fehrle argues, unconsciously submit to what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the symbolic violence of a society structured by masculine domination. In his comparative reading, he provides an account of how relational dynamics obscure the creation of women as “failed individuals” through social expectations (e.g. physical perfection) that are at once constructed as a *conditio sine qua non* and at the same time unattainable. By setting even the most “perfect” women up as (eventual) failures, these structures are a concealed layer of oppression of the patriarchal order.

The normative regulation of the body is also central in Susanne Hamscha’s reading of disabled bodies through the lens of vandalism in “Disability Aesthetics and Vandalism in American Visual Culture.” Drawing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual representations of disabled bodies, Hamscha shows how disabled bodies have historically been perceived as vandalized objects in the flesh, as bodies that have been “robbed” of their intended form and that seem to be failures because of their inability to meet cultural standards of productivity and beauty. Disabled bodies, she argues, trouble the (able-bodied) beholder precisely because he or she has been socialized in a world that sharply differentiates between “normal,” “functional,” able-bodied individuals that can fully participate in public life, and “abnormal,” “dysfunctional,” disabled individuals that fail to do so. Yet, vandalism can also function as a form of productive disturbance, defying what the beholder is accustomed to see and *wants* to see, a disturbance that may trigger visceral and sometimes even violent reactions.