

DOOMED TO FAIL: UNMASKING FAILURE AS A
POWERFUL ENGINE OF ACCUMULATION IN
CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

Appadurai ARJUN and Neta ALEXANDER, *Failure*
(Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, 145 p.)

For those of us who remember how Roland Barthes' groundbreaking work *Mythologies* shook our common sense by translating the mechanics of the language by which the bourgeois experience was turned into universal speech in French culture, reading *Failure*, by Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, makes us feel equally challenged, this time for being confronted with what hides behind the cult of failure in contemporary capitalism.

In the same way that Barthes explored current social phenomena of his time, seeking to strip them of the annoying normalness that drives received wisdom, Appadurai and Alexander track down different judgment protocols, devised by Wall Street and Silicon Valley, and show how they instituted intertwined regimes of failure to enhance profits and power and concentrate wealth. The other side of the coin, they argue, is the permanent obsolescence of social structures, a hallmark of our times.

For Barthes, myth is language. And just as there is no culture without myths, there is no culture without a language of failure¹. It is through the prism of language that both works decode changing realities that slip from our understanding and reframe meanings under our very noses.

Barthes used the notion of myth to critically address what he called in his 1957 Preface the “falsely obvious.” Appadurai and Alexander are interested in the failed promises of infinite progress and material prosperity, and seamlessly digital inclusion and personalized choice made by 21st-century techno-financial capitalism, whose reproduction is assured by the normalization of failure as a natural occurrence and by the promotion of mechanisms of denial. Denying failure as a burden and making it intrinsic—*habitual*—to modern life gives way to new risk-taking. But as the old saying goes, “a throw of the dice will never abolish chance”: if failure hits, it must be forgotten, along with all related frustration and suffering, in order to move forward and forge more links in the chain of

¹ A. APPADURAI, 2016, “Introduction,” 83 (3): xxi–xxvii.
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failures. As the authors put it, “past failure, however traumatic, is rendered forgettable and the future success is promised to be eternal and continuous” [96]. Success is a promise granted after repeated failure and no future is possible unless failure is embraced.

Though separated by decades, the *démarche* that presides over their reflection is similar in that it refers to how new tides of capitalist modernity reshape senses and discourses, and, as a result, disrupt previous forms of sociality. While Barthes examined the language of mass consumption by proposing a kaleidoscope of essays on various aspects of daily life, Appadurai and Alexander focus a single sign, that of habitual failure, now exalted by the gig economy and financial markets. And why? Because failure has become a commodity. Business models in both sectors have integrated failure as a new method destined to galvanize risk-taking, learning, and experiencing. Experiencing is key in deciphering how sovereign capitalism mobilizes minds and hearts, in a warped claim to freedom of choice and learning.

In this new book, readers will come across insights already present in Appadurai’s introduction to the *Social Research*² issue on the subject. There, he discusses a wide range of contributions that explore ideas of failure in different contexts, traditions, and geographies, showing that they vary culturally, circulate rapidly and merge instantly.

Failure is also the conceptual substratum of his cutting-edge 2015 book *Banking on Words*,³ which makes the argument that the 2008 great financial crisis was ultimately a failure of language. Here, Appadurai analyzes how the derivatives market, built on promises from written contracts, uses the power of language and technological innovations to pave the way for the radical expansion of finance through a continuous process of debt production.

Alexander’s recent work on digital culture and its paradoxes—promising limitless connectivity and information access, on the one hand, but preserving the opacity of algorithmic systems and mechanisms of data extraction, on the other—is also taken up to explain how the internet, along with the mobile apps and devices that have bolstered the abiding prestige of Silicon Valley, ultimately recast breakdowns (objective fact) into failures (individual judgment).

Thus, making explicit the collusion between Wall Street and Silicon Valley in the way flows of capital and flows of information capture value, Appadurai and Alexander unite to frame a theory of failure, rooted in the

² APPADURAI 2016.

³ Arjun APPADURAI, 2015, *Banking on Words. The Failure of Language in the Age of*

Derivative Finance (London, The University of Chicago Press).

idea of broken promises. Silicon Valley and Wall Street emerge as a machine of broken promises, starting at the level of ordinary consumers, but vigorously engulfing the citizenry as a whole, sparing only those very few “too big to fail,” who lead the process.

These two worlds are perceived as resource-infinite, reliable, and transparent, though founded on planned obsolescence and narrow choices, disturbance and volatility, and an ever-growing array of black boxes. Likewise, rather than strengthening the self, by reinforcing entrepreneurial values and behavior, this machinery promotes a “predatory dividualisation⁴”, reducing the individual to scores, ranks, ratings and attributes, so as to feed broken algorithmic identities that produce immense profits for the digital and financial industries.

What the authors do throughout the book is to demonstrate that the monetization of risks, once converted into promises led to the monetization of failure—which in turn worked to spread new forms of profits. Two examples illustrate their argument.

For Appadurai and Alexander, the search for convenience and instant gratification, now inscribed in our most urgent needs through the allure of flawless connectivity and the constant upgrade of digital devices, indicates a new chapter in the commodification of sociality [47]. Rather than claiming the right to repair, to reduce e-waste and resist planned obsolescence and mechanisms that spark new cycles of profit-making, we celebrate every innovation, no matter the losses and costs it imposes on us. We welcome it as another paradigm shift that fills the continuous promise of unfettered prospects even as we acknowledge that the chances of opting out are miniscule.

Pleasure in streaming, the authors say, is also accompanied by the personal adventure of entering the fascinating and intangible world of financial assets, in which you can take a “hedge” to insure against failing. Looking closely at the derivatives market, Appadurai and Alexander examine narratives where failure in processing information builds blocks of debt that sustain insidious forms of profits based on the unknown future value of an asset. They then call the derivatives market a great chain of promises [104], each link of the chain adding greater risk to the pile of debts. “Everyday life is linked to capital not so much by the mechanism of the surplus value of labor, but through making us all risk-bearers, whose aggregate risk can be endlessly combined to provide new forms of risk-taking and profit-making by the financial industry” [109]. In this process, workers are transformed into debt laborers;

⁴ *Ibid.*

producing debt and living in debt becomes part of the game, and failure is inevitable.

The authors have made it clear how Silicon Valley and Wall Street promote the routinization of failure by making it a powerful engine of their regime of accumulation, allegedly exploiting the myth of choice. However, when it comes to the alternatives to confront this reality and downplay its narrative, they seem to afford no help. Requiring greater accountability; reducing convenience and immediacy; becoming debt-averse; opposing waste and innovation-led obsolescence in the name of sustainability and repairs; downgrading consumption and boycotting excess; supporting antitrust laws and stronger regulations; exercising the remembrance of failure. These are a few pathways that Appadurai and Alexander offer to disrupt a global machinery that seems out of reach.

The coronavirus outbreak has displayed a dramatic digital divide worldwide and suggests that it may be even more difficult to counter the power imbalances *Failure* describes. Hundreds of millions are falling behind in work, school, and life—in a word, failing—because they do not have or cannot afford decent internet access. Working and networking from home poses severe hurdles to most of the working population, whose pressing demands tend to enhance the omnipresence of digital and financial markets in their lives. The challenge of making a new living in a world in transition with connectivity gaining even more importance threatens to normalize failure even further. In parallel, the unprecedented economic crisis derived from months of confinement and lockdown has already increased household debt and social vulnerability, aggravating dependence on banks and other financial institutions. Ad hoc emergency policies, often generous but extremely limited in time and scope, did little to fix fractured social protection systems or provide a solid cushion as a way out of the crisis. In the short run, despair and insecurity may drain resistance and stand in the way of utopian dreams.

It is certainly great time to embrace the revolution of “good enough.” The countless crises caused by overwhelming capitalism, may, as they multiply and intensify, finally provoke the crash that seems imminent and necessary, to let us forge societies rid of the pervasiveness of failure—no matter the inconveniences this may cause us.

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