

Ever tried, ever failed?

Failure. This ruthless condemnation is associated, first and foremost, with discussion of the neoliberal project. However, it is certainly questionable whether or not the neoliberal land grab will really be permanently replaced – for example, through a ‘Green New Deal’ Nevertheless, the failure of hegemonic narratives resound throughout the world. But what does that mean for social struggles? The left, so it appears, is perplexed. And an impending dispute between the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist areas of today’s left, in face of the disappearance of a common enemy, is already being prophesised.

But it is not only projects of governance which fail. The list of failed alternative social models, movements and forms of politics is neither short nor complete. What does, or could, the left do with the enormous collected experience of really-existing failures it has gathered since the Paris Commune? Should we hope that the world’s memory of the left’s disasters of the 20th Century may be dwarfed in the face of the current, undeniably poor performance of the allegedly best of all worlds? Or should we find a way of pondering about the failed attempts just while we are thinking about and discussing the ever more urgent proposal for a ‘concrete utopia’? What belongs to the dustbin of history, and which history is necessary in order to set in motion a new cycle of struggles? What has failed, or: What is destined to fail in the foreseeable future?

It’s Your Own Fault!

Things don’t only fail on a large scale. In which forms are individual failures addressed socially and individually processed? The harsh neoliberal wind which has swept through western societies in recent decades has led, first and foremost, to one thing: the disciplinary regime that once occupied a position of centrality, rendering everybody ‘useful’ (by violent means, if necessary) has been replaced by the generalisation of individual failure and the fear thereof. The hegemonic understanding of failure is reduced to the following two points: 1) Success and failure are determined entirely by the ‘permanent tribunal of the market’. 2) Individual failure simply provides a challenge which can be overcome on the way to market success: failure as opportunity! This is how the taboo of individual failure arises; because only those who do not work hard enough, or even accept their lack of success, can fail. At the same time, the failure of others is clearly visible and exercises pressure on the individual – especially since the middle class has begun to belong to the pool of those potentially affected.

The generalized perception of the possibility for success on the market brings with it the burden of unlimited responsibility for oneself. Those who fail, do so on the basis of an incorrect understanding of morality, or incorrect behaviour. For the ‘underclass’, failure is even diagnosed as a cultural trait, developed on the basis of an excess of state provision.

If in Fordism, failure in the form of poverty, for instance, was not only seen as something which could be dealt with socially, but which *must* be dealt with, then the crisis of Fordism transformed it into an individual problem – the state and society are removed from the picture.

What could emancipatory alternatives to the contemporary invocation of individual capacities to act – which was of course, originally, part of a progressive agenda – look like? How can we prevent the constriction of individuals through the equation of failure with flopping on the market? What could a discussion about failure look like, which at once seeks to increase our capacity to act, at the same time as making visible and attacking the social limits of these capacities?

Dressed for success

However, on an individual level, certain failures provide cause for celebration rather than pity. We are thinking of the construction of identity, gender performance, clear differences and pronounced boundaries which, happily, are always precarious and never completely successful. How is it possible to assess parody and other strategies, which present or provoke the failure of such constructions? Which performances of failure are fun, and which ones cause pain?

Alongside that set out above, there are certainly further interesting and productive perspectives on failure which are possible. We look forward to your ideas. The deadline for the submission of article proposals is 8 April 2009. The editorial deadline for final versions of articles is 7 May.

arranca! Editors, 2009