

## Social Change and Failure. Individual Actions and Systemic Implications

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# *Social Change and Failure. Individual Actions and Systemic Implications*

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## **Abstract**

The hypothesis supported in this paper is that individuals and groups can socialize themselves to negative events in very different, even opposite, ways. The two modes of perceiving and experiencing the failure selected here could be defined in terms of an 'adaptive failure' (a failure, even when macroscopic, does not necessarily determine a change of direction: lesson is not learned!) and a 'strategic failure' (the failure itself generates social change: trial and error).

The aim of this paper is to offer a sociological explanation of these two ways of managing failure, by analyzing: i. the type of social action that is carried out by the agents in these cases; ii. the consequences that these dynamics generate on the physiognomy and structure of socio-cultural systems.

The thesis is that an expressive type of action prevails in the first model. Individuals invest emotionally on social situations. This investment usually generates adaptation to the given conditions. As a result, it also adapts to failure. This is because the agents' true intent is to maximize their advantage in every type of situation. Even in failure.

In the second model, one imagines a strategic type of action that tends to achieve predefined goals. In this sense, without prejudice to the final objective, the failure imposes a change of strategy or it may have been planned (and put into account) as a necessary step to achieve the expected result.

Keywords: social change, failure, social action, social systems, Stoner.

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## 1. Introduction

The hypothesis supported in this paper is that individuals and social groups can deal with life negative events in very different, even opposite, ways. We want to analyze here two specific ways of reaction to failure but we argue that there are others different ways to manage personal failures, social failures and facts of a destructive nature in general. For sure it is not possible to investigate all forms of social behavior, so we will try to focus only on two main forms but, in an incidental way, we will say something about the third way.

The two ways of perceiving and experiencing the failure selected here could be defined in terms of an ‘adaptive failure’ and a ‘strategic failure’. In the first case, due to a certain passive or resigned attitude, people do not learn from their wrong actions. Consequently failure, even when macroscopic, does not necessarily determine a change of behavior nor is it capable of producing real change in social systems, which tend to remain inert and immobile over time.

In the second case, instead, the failure itself it is a phenomenon suitable for generating and accelerating social change. In accordance with the principle ‘trial and error’, the social actors tend to use the experience of failure in order to experiment with new lines of action and conduct. To better highlight the characteristics of the latter model, we will compare it with a third way of understanding and perceiving one’s failures at a psycho-social level. It is similar to strategic failure model but only in appearance. It will be defined here as ‘vitalistic failure’.

In our opinion, these two models appear to be determined by the different type of behavior that individuals adopt, producing different consequences on the physiognomy and structure of socio-cultural systems.

The aim of this paper is to offer a sociological explanation of these two ways of managing failure, by analyzing: i. the type of social action that is carried out by the agents in these cases (focusing on psycho-sociological motivations, type of rationality involved in this way of acting); ii. the consequences that these dynamics generate on the socio-cultural systems.

We will address the problem of the systemic effects of failure in the last paragraph of this paper. Now it seems appropriate to reiterate that at the basis of the various failure models hypothesized here, precise ideal-types of action can be traced.

With regard to the type of action involved, we believe that an affective type of action prevails in the first model, in the so called ‘adaptive failure’. In order to investigate this kind of attitude, we can use here the Weber’s ideal pattern called ‘affective action’ (Weber, 1980: 22) or the Parson’s expressive action (Parsons, 1968: 250). In our opinion, the affective action usually generates adaptation to the given social conditions. Adaptation, as ‘the way in which social

system of any kind [...] ‘manage’ or respond to their environment’ (Collins, 2000: 5), is imagined here as a psychological and material process. Individuals invest emotionally on social situations and, as a result, they adapt to social reality, including to failure. By adapting to every kind of circumstances, they learn how to survive to such unhappy events and how to cohabit with personal and social problems. The process of adaptation to the external world does not necessarily takes place through intentional actions or programmatic interventions: because if it is true, as Elster recalls, that ‘in addition to arousal, intentionality, cognitive antecedents, and valence, most emotions are associated with a characteristic action tendency’, it is also true that ‘not all emotions have such action tendencies: sadness and grief, and the aesthetic emotions, do not seem to have any’ (Elster, 1996: 1388).

On the other hand, what seems to unite the different forms in which the affectivity of agents is manifested is their disposition to express himself in every kind of social situations, also despite of rules and of social conventions. With the consequence of obtaining the maximization of his own advantage in numerous life circumstances. In case of failure too.

In the second model, the so called ‘strategic failure’, the individual imagines a strategic kind of action that tends to achieve predefined goals<sup>1</sup>. In order to investigate this kind of attitude, we can resort to the Weber’s ideal type called ‘goal (instrumental) action’ (Weber, 1980: 21-22) or we can consider extensive literature upon rational choice. In this regard, without prejudice to the final objective, the failure imposes a change of strategy or such failure may have been planned (and put into account) as a necessary step to achieve the expected result. In this regard, a failed marriage with a problematic but wealthy spouse can be a predetermined choice!

In order to understand the relevance of failure in the life of this type of agent, we consider the importance of strategy in individual’s actions. In the first place, the strategic action aims to achieve a target. If the question is: ‘how can I achieve this target?’, the answer could be: ‘I have to select the appropriate instruments’; so, in this perspective, also the event-failure could become a mean to reach a goal.

## **2. Definition of problem: action and socialization to the social object**

An epistemological premise of fundamental importance for fully understanding the dynamics of the failure of a person or a social system would

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<sup>1</sup> ‘We all seek success, and we know that nothing ever comes easy. In order to achieve the success we spend our lives chasing, we first need to define our goals in order to follow through to the right path’. (Dos Santos, 2015).

seem to be that of problematizing the very concept of social action. That is, it is necessary to analyze in the most accurate way the behavior put in place by the ideal agent, operating a sort of investigation under the microscope that allows to highlight the real psycho-dynamic structure. In other words, in line with the Ortega y Gasset's aphorism that life, after all, is nothing more than a 'dealing with the world' (Ortega y Gasset 1979, 848), it becomes crucial to understand how the individual agent typically relates, with greater or lesser intentionality, to external social reality. This dynamic could be traced back to the socialization process of a subject to the diversity of social objects with which he has to deal daily.

It is evident that in this investigation perspective 'failed actions, accidentally performed actions, or mistaken actions' (Campbell, 1996: 118) can only be taken into account. Excluding failed behavior from the category of sociologically relevant phenomena could in fact lead to consequences similar to those that an author like Campbell described by analyzing the situationalist epistemological framework: 'about situationalist position's *lacunae* [...] it creates serious blind spots in the sociological vision. (One) of these concerns those items of behavior which are in fact unsuccessful attempts by actors to perform certain acts. Since these will not conform with the social norms or rules pertaining to the situation in which they occur they will, according to the situationalist thesis, not be identifiable as acts at all' (Campbell, 1996: 118). Therefore, in order to avoid that even in this study 'there is no room [...] for failed actions [...]' (Campbell, *ibidem*), it may be useful to define the problem of the failed action (the perception that the social actor has and the consequences on relationships and society) making use of the concept of socialization to the social object. On closer inspection, it is precisely by imagining the way in which an individual relates to the social object that one gets to take into consideration the very structuring of these life situations; so as to be able to understand them as ontologically complex realities, of which norms are only one of the constitutive elements. The different ways to approach to social object will generate different consequences for actor's life and for its decision-making processes.

In this regard, socialization could be considered as:

- i. as an activity of selection of social objects;
- ii. as an emotional investment on social objects;
- iii. as a strategic use made of the social object;
- iv. as a sort of identification in social objects.

As an example, we should consider the 'relationship' with a small, apparently insignificant, material object, such as a small coin that an agent could find in his pocket. He can manage such coin in a different way, regardless of its economic value. In his point of view, the coin could become a relevant thing if he is a coin collector. Looking for specific coins gives a *meaning* to his

research, to his personal project of collector. The meaning derives from the internalized value, for example the value of saving and accumulation of money. Think of 'Uncle Scrooge' who used to take a bath in his pool full of small coins.

In other cases, the agent can just give a sentimental value to the coin, maybe because he likes the iconic queen's profile or because it is a souvenir, or it could be a beautiful decoration for his office walls. He does not look for the coin as a collector, so he does not select the coin, he just like or does not like the coin. This is the typical dynamics where adaptive failure model lies.

Furthermore, social actor could consider the coin as an object of identification. In this case he gives the coin a symbolic value. He uses the coin as a tip on a cafe, or for charity: coin becomes a symbolic object: its mean is to define me as a generous individual and you as a poor, indigent, individual.

Finally, I could use the coin in a strategic way. I put it in my pocket in advance because I know that I will have to use such coin to take the elevator in order not to carry up heavy bags and little kids up to the tenth floor by stairs.

That's how similar it is in strategic failure's models. It seems that this kind of social actor 'uses' the social object and the failure event too. He generally thinks 'how I can *use* this object, this relationship, this situation that I am living now, in this moment or in this phase of my life?'. From this kind of approach to life derives specific consequences. Among these, there is also a certain way of dealing with the hypotheses of failure. In this strategic perspective, the failure is considered also as a social object; it is a particular situation that occurs in my life. So, I deal with bad facts, dramatic, unlucky or unhappy events. I could use these facts *as an instrument* and this way I can avoid to succumb. On closer inspection, this form of socialization of the object is based on the subject's ability to glimpse a source of information even in unpleasant events (for example, a fashion magazine that I do not usually read but which could give me useful information!), of knowledge (contained in a meeting, a simple chat with a person with whom I am not on good terms), of emotions, of symbolic meaning. And all these contents could open new scenarios under which he could decide to modify and enhance its attitude; maybe because he understands that one was not the way and so on. As a further consequence, the actor who adopts strategic failure's model goes metaphorically ahead or back in the social system. Before 'using' the object he was in a certain point of the network; after he took his decision, he could change its status and social or existential position.

The heuristic use we make of an adaptive failure model serves to understand that we do not always relate to negative facts in a strategic way! On the other hand, as Elster still reminds us: 'another reason – which ought, however, to be a challenge rather than an excuse – may be the lack of good theories of how emotions are triggered and transformed in encounters with the world' (Elster, 1996: 1389). In our opinion, the adaptive failure model is based

upon the affective action. Actors give a sentimental value to social object (persons, material things, rules, and so on) and they use to repeat this operation very often. This allows us to say that adaptive subjects are at a shorter distance from the social object: it is just like the object is stuck on individuals! Maybe they could fall in love with the social object, but they could also hate it. In any case, even if they have a bad or a good feeling towards the social object, they could not ignore it. They must take it into account. As a consequence, they are going to adapt their behavior to the contingent, actual and bad situation. So, if they want repeat endlessly this operation, maybe in their opinion there is no failure at all. If they have not purposes, there will not be failure, because negative events are not perceived as an instrument: they are merely a fact. Likewise, if actors have not project, there is no failure: for sure negative events are not perceived as obstacles.

But if social actors invest emotionally again and again on negative facts, they can overcome them; they can manage them.

### **3. Actual refinements. Failure and Motivations**

There are different ways to manage the failure. It depends, if you want, by the personal attitude and by the motivations. We can illustrate it using an example.

I am invited to have a dinner at friends' house. I decide to bring a cake as a present. I choose the type of cake. Later, when we are going to eat the cake, I find out that nobody likes the cake I brought. Can this be considered as a failure for me?

It depends on the reason of my action and on the *meaning* that I give to my social conduct. My choice could have different socio-psychological dispositions. For example, my intention was to reach a *specific goal*, bring the best present and receive congratulations by everybody. Or, alternatively, I just wanted to make my hosts happy. In both cases, I have a specific goal and if nobody like my present, it is a failure! However, as mentioned above, in a strategic model of action, actors can learn something by failure. Now I know what the favorite cake of my friends is. Next time I will do it better! In the strategic model, acting according to the standards of instrumental rationality, the agents 'use' the failure as a mean at their disposal. And this is when the failure detects the existence of a tactical error to be corrected and opens to new and unexpected possibilities of action for the agent.

Let's consider other guests in our example and eventually the different kind of their motivations. Someone could have a specific plan that derives from an ideal model of acting. This model leads his conduct in different social situations.



For example, he has a strong value of hospitality. As a consequence, he knows very well all rules for manage this kind of social situation. He knows what to bring as a gift and he will surely choose the best cake. So, in case nobody appreciates his cake, he will not consider this as a failure. His reaction is related to social reality that he perceives as very far. People do not understand his good intention and his perfect choice! It is very likely that the fact that cake was not appreciated by his friends depends on their hostility, on their rough way to act. So, it is not his personal failure. And probably next time he will decline their invitation!

This emphasis on personal qualities put to the test by the failure is well expressed in this passage that Merton dedicated to the theme of success in American culture: 'success or failure depends entirely on personal qualities: he who fails has only himself to blame. In fact, the concept of man who makes himself has as a corollary the man who destroys himself [...] failure represents a double defeat: the explicit defeat represented by the failure to succeed and the implicit defeat of not having the skills and moral qualities necessary to achieve it' (Merton, 2000: 360).

In the 'adaptive failure model' I decide to bring a gift and I choose the type of cake considering my taste and my emotions. My feeling and my mood took me to enter the bakery and maybe I chose a specific cake because it was decorated and appealing.

Since I had no goal to achieve, and no value to testimony, but just a feeling to express, if nobody likes the cake, it is

not my failure! I have no fault for a possibly wrong choice. On the contrary, my choice is *justified* by my good proposal, by my taste, by my emotions. I wanted to share my happiness with my friends but they didn't understand me! In accordance with this theoretical pattern, this social actor probably will invest emotionally also on the alleged failure. Maybe he will eat a piece of cake by himself, trying to show all his disappointment to his friends. It is highly probable that he could fight with everybody or at least he will act in a polemical way. What it is important for us to underline is that the failure does not teach anything to us. In fact, next time I will act exactly in the same way. If I go again to the bakery, emotions will overwhelm me one more.

As we can infer, in this case I did not need to select the best object, the best cake, following a strict protocol of behavior, possibly depending on a value. My intention is not to be a perfect guest, and therefore I did not need to know my friends' favorite cake or to understand the rule to follow as a guest. If I do not have an axiological project or a strategic plan, I will be a little bit indecisive. But, at the same time, people will feel that I am a free and an authentic person.

It seems clear that in the adaptive model, agents do not behave according to the dictates of classical rationality (axiological or instrumental rationality), but they try to justify the situations as they are outlined. The agent's intent is to avoid having to redefine the next moves in a strategic way and obtaining an advantage also from the negative event. In order to justify and deny the failure achieved, we will have to resort to a rationalization activity. It consists essentially in attributing to the facts (including the failure) an *ex post* value. 'Because the emotion of envy, for instance, is so abhorrent (a second-order emotional reaction), it may cause us to redefine the situation so as to justify the wonderful feeling of righteous indignation. He has something which I covet; he probably got it in some immoral way, and at my expense' (Elster, 1996: 1389).

#### **4. Main forms of Failure. Two case-studies**

The strategic approach to the failure seems to be the action involved and described in the recent book of the French philosopher Pépin, *Il magico potere del fallimento* (Pépin, 2017). Many cases and situations described in Pépin's book could belong to this category of action, to strategic failure. In his theoretical perspective it is probably true that failure itself does not exist. It depends on the meaning that social actors give to a social object. For the men and women that Pépin describes, failure is a name for bad events, a way to manage them.

In this regard, some of the cases mentioned by Pépin in his book do not derive, in our opinion, to strategic failure. This aspect is clear when he writes about great historical characters, as general de Gaulle, trying to explain their strength and resiliency in terms of vitalistic philosophy. He quotes French philosopher Bergson (Pépin 2017, 46) arguing that power of life is like an ivy that covers walls. In our opinion, Pépin, explaining some hypotheses of subjective reaction to a possible failure in accordance with the vitalistic philosophy and the Hegelian dialectic, identifies and applies to these cases a further type of ideal behavior, that at this point it will not be inappropriate to define as 'vitalistic failure'. The difference between this model of explanation and the one defined here as strategic lies in the different motivations of the agents. A vitalistic approach to life, as Pépin himself admits, conceives the failed/successful relationship in terms of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. To life force is opposed a counterforce. The result is, as is well known, the synthesis as the overcoming of opposites.

A strategic approach, instead, conceives the same relationship in terms of alternation. The outcome of your action can be a success or, alternatively, a failure.

Consequently, in the two models the role played by the acting subject changes.

The vitalist character, unlike the strategic one, does not ‘use’ but selects the social object as the most appropriate tool to achieve its powerful will to action. The same biographical notes that Pépin offers of de Gaulle seem to underline the General’s desire to ‘obtain the recognition he thinks he deserves’ (Pépin, 2017: 43) in quite different ways. Here the volitional and subjective factor remains central rather than the teaching or warning offered by the failed actions<sup>2</sup>.

Vitalistic failure is a behavioral attitude in many respects similar to that described by March and Olsen regarding the so-called ‘the logic of appropriateness’: ‘A vision of actors following internalized prescriptions of what is socially defined as normal, true, right or good, without, or in spite of, calculation of consequences and expected utility, is of ancient origin. The idea was, for example, dramatized by Sophocles more than 2000 years ago in Antigone’s confrontation with King Creon and by Martin Luther facing the Diet of Worms in 1521: Here I stand, I can do no other’ (March, Olsen, 2004: 3). As the literary and historical examples reported by the two authors emblematically illustrate, it is basically a question of sociologically imagining a subject who acts in full coherence with his own moral values. The subject who decides to submit to common rules of life, it is essentially because from his point of view they represent selected instruments in order to fulfill in the best way his own moral commandment, his own life project. In reality, from our point of view, these internalized rules, even when they do not coincide with those followed by the majority, nevertheless denote the tendency of the social actor to ‘to develop rules, codes and principles of conduct to justify and prescribe action in terms of something more than expected consequences’ (March, Olsen: 3).

Since the vitalistic social personality is strongly motivated and often value oriented, it is doubtful that this kind of character could be well aware of their own fault. Perhaps, in these cases, bad facts Pépin was referring to are not perceived as a failure! On the contrary, it is more likely that actor is not aware of potentiality of his error, as it occurs in strategic failure. Rather negative event is perceived here like an *obstacle* to his own personal, existential project. And this

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<sup>2</sup> ‘We need to make a clear distinction between the intentions that one has *prior* to the performance of an action (prior intention) [...] and the intentions that one has *during* the performance of the action itself (intention-in-action). [...] The closest English word to intention-in-action is ‘trying’. If I want to do something and try but fail to do it, all the same I did have an intention-in-action. If I had the intention-in-action, then I tried’. (Searle, 2010: 33-34).

seems true when Pépin himself recalls Nietzsche's paradigm of action. Indeed, this reference to the philosopher of overman authorizes us to doubt that the subject in question, after all, learns much by the failure. Rather, it is more likely that such circumstances the social actor tends to consider the failed event as a sort of reaction to the challenge he himself has launched to the outside world. To the conscience of the 'vitalist' subject, in fact, social reality often appears in the guise of as an enemy, which just as often must be fought. The actual reason why 'failure does not beat me' is not because I learn something from it but because of my tenacity and willfulness I am bound, almost forced, to face it. It is impossible to surrender or retreat, if not to take a pause for reflection or even the momentum for a run-up.

The essential difference with the 'strategic failure' model is found in the fact that in the latter the subject, usually the holder of specific roles within as many well-identified social systems, tends to experience failure within a given procedures. The pattern of the strategic failure model is in fact the social network; it is made by different clusters, parts and different social roles<sup>3</sup>. Socialization with the social object, with the things and facts of life, does not happen as if the individual is involved in a tragic battle, but within a socio-normative frame where it is possible to negotiate with the outside world. In this epistemological context, also failure is considered as the meeting of two individuals who play two different social roles. In other words, here it is likely that in the failure event are involved different individual social actions, and not two individuals considered in their wholeness and involved in a final duel!

To illustrate the difference between the two ways of experiencing a failure experience, consider, as an example, the action of the examiner that, in an academic context, rejects with very harsh words my essay: in which way can I react to this judgment?<sup>4</sup> Maybe, if I react according to 'vitalistic failure model',

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<sup>3</sup> See Goffman, Erving. 1952. *On Cooling the Mark Out. Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, pages 451-463.

<sup>4</sup>Typically, cooling out is called for when a person is involuntarily deprived of a role in some circumstance that implies he was not capable of it. Examples of such assaults on sense of self are abundant. At the non-institutional level, there is the person who considered himself 'lover' but is involuntarily relegated to the status of 'friend'. In a bureaucracy, there is also the long-serving bureaucrat who believed herself entitled to a promotion but who is passed over by management. If the institution does not provide a means to pacify the humiliated person in such situations, the victim may make a scene, become violent, or sue'. (Healy, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> 'There is a norm in our society persuading persons to keep their chins up and make the best of it' Goffman says [...] Material loss is hard, but more terrible is the loss of self-esteem. Failure and rejection show us that we are not the people we thought we were [...] It is not just the injury; it is the insult that is potentially socially destructive.

negative judgment becomes a way to destroy myself, as a researcher; but also as a man. It is highly probable that the negative review, perceived by the subject as an impediment to a specific life project, and in perspective as an indiscriminate attack on one's person, will only generate a severe judgment about the examiner (this is the case of the so-called 'extra punitive reaction' which induces to attribute responsibility to the third party) or about myself (this is the case of the so-called 'intra punitive reaction' and self-blame).

In the case of 'strategic failure', instead, such judgment is perceived just as a way to discard my essay. So I can learn something: for instance, I can follow the examiner's judgment but more generally, I can scrupulously understand something more about the academic evaluation mechanism and procedure.

We remain on the subject, then, if, for the purposes of this investigation, we now consider a literary text, which today enjoys, albeit posthumously, a considerable critical fortune. John Williams's *Stoner* is a campus novel written and set in the American academic world of the 1950s (Williams, 2003). As shown by the renewed interest that sociologists, philosophers and literary critics have shown in the personality of the protagonist, the academic professor Stoner, from our point of view, this novel lends itself well to offering a surprising content of knowledge.

William Stoner, in fact, is that character for a long time felt by readers as 'a man full of weaknesses, easy to give up, sometimes unbearably passive and deservedly doomed to failure' (Carnevali, 2016: 15). The question we ask then is whether, even in light of the critical rehabilitation of the work, Stoner can still be considered a symbol, albeit literary, of existential or social failure. Indeed, as a critical review of the novel, published in 1966, *The Virtues of Failure* (Howe, 1966) suggests in the title, does Stoner represent a paradigmatic example of the individual who experiences, albeit unintentionally, throughout his life and in every phases of it, the distressing experience of failure (evidently understood here in its sense of lack of social success)?

To answer this question, as well as the more direct one formulated by the elderly gentleman who, suddenly getting up during a reading session, protested in the following terms: 'why should I read the stories of this failure? '(...). He refuses to fight for his country. His marriage is a nightmare. He is persecuted at work. He never does anything' (Griem, 2016: 87). It will be appropriate to analyze, albeit succinctly, the ways in which 'the agent' Stoner demonstrates that he is socializing to the different situations that life presents to him. In short, it is necessary to understand how his personality acts and, above all, how he reacts

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This is why friends and relations and teachers and bosses provide all sorts of explanations for why what happened to us is not personal (even though it is). 'The process was unfair'. It does not reflect who you really are'. (Menand, 2015).

to the events that mark a biography that can only apparently seem banal and devoid of interest for an external observer.

For the sake of synthesis only two of the biographical events narrated in the novel are considered here.

The first concerns the young Stoner, the young man who decided to change his studies by dropping agrarian studies for philology. While the second life circumstance that is significant for us instead refers to the protagonist who, now a middle-aged man, begun an adulterine sexual relationship with his doctoral student.

Two crucial life decisions, those to which we are referring, which reveal a strong emotional investment on the part of Stoner. In both situations he showed the audience that he was a passionate man: he fell in love for his study but also for the student! The love for scientific research, as well as the strong attraction he feels for the young student, are at the same time an expression of a conscious, reasoned choice, which in its own way betrays a certain detachment of the subject from the outside world. Clear indications of the fact that Stoner acts ‘in an expressive way’ are in fact traceable both in the excess of passion manifested towards certain ‘social objects’, and in that form of intellectualism which, in a way not so different from that of the melancholy and resigned subject described from Lepenies (Lepenies, 1985), are adamantly deduced in the following passages of the novel: ‘Dispassionately, reasonably, he contemplated the failure that his life must appear to be’ (Williams, 2003: 284).

‘A kind of joy came upon him, as if borne in on a summer breeze. He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure – as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been’ (Williams, 2003: 287).

If analyzed as constitutive elements of the heuristic category of ‘action’, Stoner’s existential decisions do not lend themselves to being traced back to a long-term plan (Stoner did not have a plan to make career and in fact he died as a researcher!), nor a strategy, defensive or aggressive as it is (he did not leave his wife, even when the marriage has unquestionably failed). In both situations there is no plan and there is no strategic approach to life. On the contrary, his decisions represent the outcome of a successful process of integral and functional adaptation to external reality. This adaptation, it seems appropriate to underline, generates in the character a sufficient degree of gratification, that *quantum* of personal pleasure that Stoner would perhaps have hardly achieved if he had planned his actions in a more systematic way, or when he had decided to face his enemies (the wife or colleagues) using tactics and strategies. Stoner’s personality is neither vitalistic nor strategic, at least in the sense that up to now we have wanted to give the two terms. Therefore, if we attribute his alleged failures to the adaptive failure model, it is because, looked at from his point of

view, Stoner was able to live a life that '[...] despite and perhaps because of its banality [...] it was profoundly authentic and justified' (Carnevali, 2015: 34).

In short, probably those of the character-Stoner are not real failed actions. Or at least they are not for him. Life (and plot) are the results of his choices. They became the mirror, the effects, of a particular social personality, of a specific interaction with the social object.

Stoner is not the one who can do it, according to Collins, the 'right thing' under the wrong circumstances? It will be worth remembering that an author like Presthus wrote about those personalities (precisely of 'tendency to do the right thing at the wrong time') (Presthus, 1971: 299-230) who with difficulty *adapt* (our italics) to the rules and dynamics of bureaucratic organization. This is the so called 'ambivalent man', a figure in some ways tragic, according to the author, who 'wants success, and yet refuses to pay the price with a behavior that the majority approves' (Presthus, 1971: 300)<sup>5</sup>.

We can read the story of Stoner in the opposite perspective of the 'strategic failure': if we imagine that the ideal agent considered here identifies career progression as a targeted and circumscribed goal, then the possible opposition of its colleagues must become an event to be managed in a rational and strategic way. And this in order to prevent the conflict from turning into a failure without redemption, which definitively jeopardizes his career.

If, however, the social agent's priority is not his career, but possibly that of dedicating himself to study and teaching, activities that gratify him, giving him pleasure, the opposition and eventually the conflict with colleagues is not perceived as a failure but as a matter of fact, devoid of the meanings that the careerist subject would eventually attribute to it. And, just as Stoner takes affective and emotional satisfaction from the professional duties he prefers, also with regard to the issue of hostility manifested to him in the workplace, he will use his affective socialization. This means that this agent will invest emotionally also on bad relationships, on disputes and political and intellectual fights with his colleagues. As if he said: 'I am in these new social situations and I have to adapt to them'.

Could the attitude shown by Stoner protect him from the accusation of failure?

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<sup>5</sup> A person – continues the author – who, lacking a sense of proportions, 'often takes a position of principle even on relatively insignificant issues' (Presthus 1971, 299). How can one deny, moreover, that the entire *cursus honorum* of Professor Stoner, never crowned, as mentioned, from a full professional success, has been strongly conditioned both by the dynamics of power typical of academic élites, and by the position of principle that Stoner himself takes, in a way as obstinate as it is surprisingly coherent, towards some colleagues.

In Presthus' opinion, it seems appropriate to add it, the conclusion reached by the ambivalent subject is that: 'nothing can escape the conditioning (of the élites). Therefore, individual intervention is of no value (...) As Freud observes, this misrepresentation of reality satisfies his needs in two ways: he escapes an unpleasant reality, which could prove to him that he is in fact responsible for the failure; and so he can also use his neurosis, often exploiting it to rationalize the inability to do fruitful work' (Presthus, 1971: 303).

In conclusion, the attempt to reveal the particular behavioral dynamics activated by a man like Stoner could perhaps help explain the reason for the posthumous success of a novel but above all the reasons why the audience demonstrates to appreciate an 'everyman', a character stigmatized for a long time as a failed man<sup>6</sup>.

## **5. Futures lines of development: about failure in the Social Systems**

Despite criticism, one methodological approach to the social change's analysis is the system Theory. With a view to offering a contribution to the identification of future lines of research development that take into account an adequate conceptualization of the notion of failure, we could use systemic methodology in order to consider the macro-structural side of both the so-called adaptive failure and strategic failure. In other words, the question we ask ourselves is: what kind of social organization we can image in a social system<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In this regard, compare the analogies that exist in the way in which, in the light of the notion of existential failure, the biographical events of two scholars who are obviously very distant from each other have been briefly described: William Stoner, the character of literary fiction, and Max Weber, the great intellectual we all know:

'Stoner continues to consider his life with this objectifying gaze, commensurate his desires to reality with respect to friendship, marriage, love, teaching and knowledge. All five he pursued, all five he achieved in part, in all five he failed' (Vogelmann, 2016: 121). 'Weber was indeed a great political writer, the founder of today's sociology, the recognized scholar and creator of extraordinary works, the companion of his wife and the friend of his friends, a man who knew happiness; but political action was denied him, his works remained gigantic fragments, his existence was shaken in health for many years and very limited in its explanation. This way of considering Max Weber's failure in the external things of life as a mere fact does not affect the very meaning of his person. [...] His failure does not coincide with what he was unable to do nor does his performance coincide with what he knew how to accomplish. His failure was a suffering, which is like an active will, it was the real failure of man in the historical moment imposed on him' (Jaspers, 1998: 100-101).

<sup>7</sup> 'The unintended consequences of action are of central importance to social theory in so far as they are systematically incorporated within the process of reproduction of



(Giddens, 1979: 59) when prevails a certain attitude toward the failure? What happens, for example, if in a given social group, mainly crossed by hedonistic and expressive attitudes aimed at guaranteeing immediate gratification, nobody accepted the failure?

Or what happens if, prevailing the social values of self-realization and social success, the actors aim to satisfy their medium and long-term interests, also capitalizing on the failure<sup>8</sup>?

We have said that in the adaptive model the failure is not perceived as such by those who have determined it. It is important now to underline the ambivalence of this social process: a community (a national group, f) that systematically does not recognize the negative event as a failure, is able to produce two main consequences in its own social life and in the way the system operates:

- i. this kind of system appears 'inert'. It tends to reproduce itself continuously, without changing and correcting itself.

To better understand the concept of 'inertia', we could recall here the analyzes of Ortega y Gasset on man-mass and on his evident propensity to inertia: 'Intellectually mass is the one who, faced with any problem, is happy to think what he finds comfortably in his head. Mass-man would never have resorted to something outside himself, if the circumstance had not violently forced him' (Ortega y Gasset, 1979: 849). A social system that tends to be inert, in the same way as the person we define here as 'inert', could therefore operate according to the following typical sequence: 'I do not learn anything by my errors but, on the contrary, I continue to invest emotionally on new situations; also on crisis situations and on the consequences of failed actions'.

As an example, see the social life in urban community. We can consider a fact occurred every Christmas in Naples, a big city located in the South Italy. Municipality of Naples used to place a Christmas tree in the main square of the city, but, systematically, every year such tree was destroyed by vandals. As evident, this fact caused distress in the people and damaged the image of

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institutions' (Giddens, 1979: 59) and '[...] combine within the reproduction of social systems'. (*Ivi*, 250).

<sup>8</sup> Evidently there are cases in which there is less agreement between the individual and society! Lasswell, for example, reported two hypotheses of rejection by the individual of some fundamental traits of a society, democratic and with high internal mobility, which had also favored his social rise.

In this perspective of analysis, the deviation from the development of the democratic personality is therefore traced back to 'failure due to lack of identification' or 'failure due to disappointment'. In the latter hypothesis, the search, by the disappointed subject, for 'an idea or a person on which to depend entirely' is, in our opinion, fundamental. (Lasswell; 1975: 519).

citizens. Nevertheless, the public Institutions decided to act in the same way every year without considering any remedy, knowing that the tree was located in an ‘hot spot’ and that criminal gangs were going to destroy the tree at a certain time and in a certain way.

The example intends to demonstrate that if the social system proves to be ‘inert’, since nothing changes over the years, even in the face of a destructive event that is repeated with systematic regularity, this is due, in the light of this theoretical reconstruction, to the fact that evidently, in the socio-cultural context considered, nobody (neither the Administration, nor the city community, nor the criminal groups) recognizes that vandalization of the tree actually constitutes a failure! On the contrary, all the protagonists of the story in question, in hindsight, are preparing to make further emotional investments. Possibly someone can consider the dynamic involving the public authority and the deviance behavior as ‘folkloristic’. For sure, this matter can be interesting for tourists and may also an inspiration source for artist and novelists. Public opinion is not too scandalized, possibly justifying the fact as induced by the difficult living conditions of the baby gangs. The formal control agencies, for their part, look at the incident with benevolent condescension, considering it a small thing compared to other forms of crime. Finally, the administration continues to propose that solution, paradoxically considering it an adequate response, as it is inclusive and non-discriminatory.

In the model of adaptive failure, step by step, the issue is not managed anymore and, at a certain point, it appears fatally at risk of implosion. In short, the crisis would always seem to be around the corner.

ii. It is at this point that we can reflect on the second effect. Even though the system is inert, all the situation, also failed situations, paradoxically show that the system is vital and non-static. The same risk of systemic implosion, feared above, is then promptly averted. We can’t deem implosion to an irreversible status, a final destruction, but just like at risk that recurs, albeit on a regular basis. If the system survives, in short, this is because, albeit the crisis is determined by a long-term omission and a lack in managing a situation, it will be overwhelmed in a way or in another. Basically, behind the crisis, there are the same reasons that led to overcome it. In other words, even if the crisis is caused by our negligence, such lack of will is balanced by a general capacity of adaptation. It consists in opposing to crisis and to failure an emotional reaction. As Elster reminds us, in fact, ‘Also, when an emotion causes us to reassess the situation, a new emotion will take its place’ (Elster, 1996: 1389).

In this regard, the success of the TV fiction, called *Gomorra*, showing criminal life in Naples, is an emblematic social process. A bad social phenomenon (criminality) becomes a good product (the TV fiction). By adopting a macroscopic point of view, we can see how public denunciation of

a social plague, as mafia is, is not perceived like a symptom of general failure (failure of politics, Institutions, civil society) but as a matter of fact. It becomes a fictional drama that reproduces slavishly social reality. However, it should be considered that this cultural product, even in the opinion of much criticism, is well done; style is very realistic and audience likes it very much.

Is it a form of adaptation? It seems clear that people do not see in the TV fiction, in the script, a failure, something that eventually remember them their faults, the complicity as citizens. Ortega y Gasset again remembers that there is a type of man 'who demands nothing but is content with what he is and remains in admiration for himself (...). Naively, without needing to be in vain, like the most natural thing in the world, he will try to affirm and accept what he finds in himself: opinions, ambitions, preferences, tastes' (Ortega y Gasset, 1979: 849).

Therefore, under these conditions, we understand better the appreciation for something attractive, for a product made according to good technical standards. We limit ourselves to 'consume' and certainly not to 'use' it as a tool of knowledge, as a warning of risks and of the dangers present in one's social and relationship life. It is probable that, all in all, this evident removal of the idea of a general failure, the natural indifference towards the serious structural deficiencies of the system, is pervaded by an attitude that is so fatalistic but which basically rests on its implicit logic: 'The deliberate cultivation of positive emotions is constrained by the fact that emotional reactions tend to be coupled to one another. It would be fine if we could enjoy hope without being disappointed when the hoped-for event fails to occur, but we cannot' (Elster, 1996: 1396).

In order to frame 'strategic failure model' in a specific kind of social system, we should image a network-system, *i.e.* a structure that, in a micro sociological perspective, is composed by individuals who assume social roles; in a macro sociological perspective, instead, it is made by parts that play specific functions.

We hypothesize social actors who, by tending to act in order to achieve specific objectives, find the best socio-structural conditions to do so in this type of network-shaped system. How to reconstruct, in these cases, the typical way in which the subject socializes to his social reality, to the outside world?

To stay with the case studies mentioned above, we could ask ourselves how the individual, as a member of a certain urban community, relates to the symbolic meaning that can have, for example, a redevelopment of his city if it concerns a monument of recognized artistic or landscape interest.

The hypothesis supported is that, unlike those guided by an adaptive mentality, here the social actors do not care how express themselves in relation to a monument. Provocatively we would say that they are not interested in either vandalizing it, as criminals do, or cleaning it up, as volunteers will. Perhaps more

pragmatically, these ideal actors eventually are interested in how they can use this monument in order to accomplish a goal. In this sense, even an asset of artistic value, such as a monument, or landscape, such as a panorama, can be perceived, perhaps even at an unconscious level, in the social imaginary, as an individual instrument of action. It is no coincidence that we can imagine different ‘uses’ of it by the citizens: the monument can be valued as a tourist attraction, it can be used in order to make a business or to celebrate a benefactor of the city, or even to destroy him as a symbol of my protest. It is evident that here we are hypothesizing the existence of a social mentality in which a utilitarian approach prevails.

People behave in a functional way. They use instrumental rationality. It is also in this way that they can create and strengthen social roles network. Actors’ challenge is to conciliate subjective needs with social systems rules. This is the reason why they assume social roles. But this is not necessarily an ethical conduct. Individual manages social objects (and failure) not necessarily because they are humbler than others or they act in an ethical way.

Consequence’s analysis must consider that now aggregation is based on commune goals. Less than on commune feelings. I join persons who want to make business with that monument or people that want to protest to obtain a kindergarten in the area just around this monument. In this way we have a structure formed by roles where we can distinguish its internal, interrelated parts.

So, in order to understand relationship with failure we should ask this question: how does failure affect a purpose-oriented social system, capable of achieving high levels of effectiveness, within which a strategic socialization prevails?

Unlike a social system such as the adaptive one, which appears both inert and vital, here the system would seem to oscillate between stages of greater progress and the ever-present risk of regression to an earlier stage.

The constitutive character of this type of inter-individual organization would seem to be that of operating the system in a dynamic and evolutionary way. Operating not according to a linear development model but changing over time (*i.e.*, today is very different from yesterday!) and in space (one step forward, one step behind), the systems demonstrate reactive, not inert. And this is also due to the fact the people react to failure changing direction. Not necessarily choosing a good direction.

From his careful observation of American social life, Tocqueville drew, among others, the conclusion that if ‘aristocratic nations are by nature inclined to restrict too much the boundaries of human perfectibility, democratic nations, on the other hand, sometimes exaggerate them’ (Tocqueville, 1991: 522).

Probably the philosophy of life to which the author alludes represents the ethical-cognitive assumption that allows you to accept failure in a proactive way, with a pragmatic and, if desired, optimistic approach. The search for a superior state of development, the improvement of the conditions of one's private existence or of the standards of quality of social life, induce individuals and Institutions to consider all the ways that are potentially able to open a passage towards the goal, be it professional success or the progress of social conditions. 'One cannot imagine how many facts spontaneously depend on this philosophical theory, according to which man is infinitely perfectible', writes Tocqueville (Tocqueville, 1991: 522).

On the other hand, how can we deny that if, at the level of individual motivations, the priority set is to achieve the goal (Weber, 1980: 21-22), it is not appropriate to go only one way. In theory, from this point of view, even the failure experience can in fact constitute a segment, however painful, of the path taken. As mentioned above, the hypothesis is that in these cases the individuals recognize and accept the failure. Basically, agents use the unwanted event: 'man realizes all too well that a people or an individual, however enlightened he may be, is not infallible, others improve their conditions, some worsen their condition and he draws the conclusion that man in general it has an unlimited faculty of improvement. His reversals of fortune show him that no one can delude himself into having discovered the absolute good; his successes encourage him to pursue it without rest (Tocqueville, 1991: 522)'.

It is evident that the difference with the adaptive model of social organization is also played out at the level of relevance and importance which, in certain socio-cultural configurations, accords to a widespread trust in social change, to the chances of grasping the possibilities offered, in order to perfect the state and functioning of things and situations.

This possibilistic attitude would seem to be almost completely neutralized when, on the contrary, 'complete vital freedom as a native and pre-established state' is conceived. Thus, according to Ortega y Gasset, the new mass 'operates'. It is a sort of collective actor who finds nothing from the outside capable of forcing it 'to recognize limits, and therefore, to have to deal at any moment with other instances, especially with superior' (Ortega y Gasset, 1979: 849).

## **6. Conclusions**

In this paper, as evident, the focus of the analysis was placed on the behavioral variable. The question that has arisen concerns the possible answers, the reactions, which individuals and social systems oppose to the experience of failure. The epistemological premise implies that social actors, both individual

and collective, act and react in a typical and recursive way. We have set out to analyze the distinctive characteristics and properties of these social actions. By behaving in a way not dissimilar to how one has acted in the past, but also to the way in which other members of the groups in which one is socialized behave, individuals and social systems end up acquiring their own specific identity; what allows its recognition from the outside as well as the scientific identification by a third observer.

At this point of the analysis, a further question can be asked. How will these systems then affect the individual action of the subject? More specifically, how will the perception that the social actors, within those same systems, end up having of the failure be affected? The survey would offer useful answers to integrate the interpretative framework of the phenomenon that we define here as ‘failure’: if individuals, repeating, over time and within specific community realities, a certain way of acting, end up creating system with specific properties, in what way will this same system prove to favor, and eventually to legitimize, those same behaviors?

This type of investigation, although suitable to represent the natural development of the study in question, is situated in a partially different epistemological perspective. In order to try to answer these questions, it is in fact necessary to assume the *structure*, rather than the action, as a fundamental interpretative paradigm in the analysis of social phenomena. In this regard, and with a view to developing this theme in the future within a hopefully fruitful area of study, a useful methodological option is the one that proposes to break down the society-system into the various social subsystems that otherwise interfere with choices of the individual.

Consider for example, albeit only as a ‘preview, the conditioning that the socio-cultural context, already defined as ‘adaptive’, is able to exert on the idea and the widespread perception of failure. How, we might ask, does the media communications subsystem help to define, in the social imaginary, the traits of a socially ‘winning’ behavior or, on the contrary, the sense of a failed behavior? In this regard, the media phenomenon that has already been mentioned, that is the systematic proposition by the media, in particular of generalist TV, of life stories represented within subcultures and criminal settings, can be considered an instrument, albeit indirect, of celebration of a given behavioral model? If social success reaches the boss and his family, in terms of simultaneous advancement in the ranks of the hierarchies of prestige, power, money, is it conceivable that failure is configured instead as an inability to reach an adequate criminal status?

Another paradoxical aspect of the phenomenon in question can be found in the job market. We can push ourselves to believe that, given economic and socio-cultural conditions, to be able to obtain in Italy the so called ‘citizenship

income', sometimes even in the absence of the requisites required by law, represents a sort of victory against the State, therefore a highly rewarding behavior? Who is the real failure in these cases? The one who gets the subsidy despite not possessing the legal requirements or the one who cannot ask for it despite basically needing it?

However, the virtuous effects of an adaptive system cannot be ignored. It, precisely by virtue of its constitutive *inertia*, often ends up by *de facto* accrediting itself as a tolerant and inclusive system. If, for example, in the parental model, dominant in the family-subsystem, there is a particular willingness to accept (or ignore) forms of diversity or deviance of the offspring, the lower the risk of perceiving one's possible behavioral anomaly as a form of failure!

In conclusion, is it conceivable that in the system in question personal and social success is directly proportional to the ability to adapt to social situations that one lives and experiences?

Managing the social resources available as if it were a matter of fact, taken for granted, in order to derive all the advantage and gratification possible, is a different attitude from the one who uses such *resources* to achieve certain objectives. And among the socially shared objectives there is also that of behaving appropriately to the expectations of the social roles. This typically occurs in a 'strategic' social system, the type of context that, according to Merton, fails if disorganized; that is, when 'the structure of status and roles is not as effectively organized as it could be in that place and moment' (Merton and Nisbet, 1961: 720). We deduce that organized is instead a system that allows you to compete to successfully acquire roles of various kinds.

In these cases, a condition for access to the various subsystems, the world of sport or entertainment, for example, is to achieve performances that are appropriate to the roles that one wants to assume. If the judgment of compatibility between the performance and the required profile in that system is negative, it is likely that you are facing a personal and professional failure. There are obviously risks here too. Think of the paradoxical effect, confirmed by the testimonies of many American celebrities, by virtue of which artistic performances, personal abilities and personalities whose undoubted value will be recognized and rewarded only later, are also subject to sensational disruptions. Probable that to decree the so called 'failure' in these cases is the circumstance of achieving performances that are not strictly calibrated on technical standards or social norms on which the most widespread role expectations are based. The rejection, at the beginning of their career, of the auditions of future divas of the star systems, such as Meryl Streep or Oprah Winfrey (similar episodes also concern the famous Beatles band) seems to be explained in the light of the discrepancy of the image, of the style, of the

melodies proposed by the beginners compared to those more in vogue at that time.

However, the system in which ‘if you have never failed you have never tried anything new’ is declared is the same system that probably contemplates the possibility of sanctioning, correcting and therefore improving that same performance. In a highly complex system, on the other hand, it is likely that the failure experienced in one subsystem can turn into a winning performance in another subsystem, thus helping to change over time the same way of understanding and perceiving the social role object of condemnation or appreciation. Also in this case, the conditions for this form of social change to take place would seem to be, on the one hand, the motivation (oriented to the purpose) of the social actor, who intends to achieve a performance that conforms to certain regulatory criteria and standards and, from the other, a Society able to offer a wide range of opportunities to those who do not give up and want to try again!

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