

Session 8: Excellence and failure in winner-take-all systems

It was more than 20 years ago that Malpas and Wickham (1995) observed that sociologists get it wrong in viewing failure as “an aberration, a temporary breakdown within the system” (p. 38). Failure is far more *common* than is success and this claim is even truer in excellence-based processes and winner-take-all systems. Concentrating resources on high-performers entails *by definition* the exclusion of the absolute majority of applicants. If excellence is the polar star, in a very Durkheimian way, failure and rejection are *normal*. At the analytical level, three key topics are especially important here: (i) the causes of market failure of innovative start-ups; (ii) the consequences of rejection in organized settings; (iii) the orders of worth at work in competitions and tournaments. As for the firsts, what are the sociological factors that explain just few start-uppers *survive* the first two years? Novelty is neither sufficient nor necessary for market success. Why and how novelty fails? As for the second, how do smart, well-trained and motivated agents, all with an incentive to do well, *cope* with rejection? Rejection may erode interpersonal ties, destroy social capital and corrode the intrinsic motivation of agents. This is more so in the so-called “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiappello 2006) where personal identity and social networks are deeply intertwined in a project-based logic. As for the third, which are the logics of worth that govern juries’ assessment of winning applicants in different domains? How *competition* works in non-market settings? As it has been stated: “[I]f the critical market principle is competition, might there be other, nonmarket institutions, policies and interventions which might just as easily deliver the specific virtues of competitive practices? (...). Is market competition necessary to deliver competitiveness? (Davies, 2014, pp. 43-4).

Papers dealing empirically with the logics of excellence, failure and rejection in different domains (firms, markets, educational systems, public action, rating systems, tournaments, electronic markets, cultural production) are welcome.

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