

1. Facing failure in international relations: framing and theming – Introduced by Jean-Christophe Graz and Charlie Dannreuther (U Lausanne & U Leeds)

This session introduces the overall theme of the roundtables of the Winter School. It provides space to disentangle the concept of failure and to engage various manifestations of failure, such as those related to global crises, large international conferences, or distinct policy domains. Such failures may remain intrinsically contested and generate distinct epistemic and policy changes. Yet, failure may also reflect less visible instances of power relations not subject to any purposeful action. This introductory roundtable will be the opportunity to get to know via shared understandings of how our own research work might be related to different understanding of failure.

Readings: (Best, 2016; Mica et al., 2023: 3–11)

2. Translating fieldwork into academic knowledge: challenges and failures – Introduced by Renata Summa (U Groningen)

Fieldwork is a deeply sensorial experience, permeated by sounds, smells, rhythms, emotions, relations, doubts and breakdowns. Moreover, interviews or participant observation put as in contact with a myriad of opinions, narratives and life stories. Trying to make sense and translate all these multiplicity into academic texts may represent a real challenge. While researching and writing, our research object proves to be much more mobile and illusive than we thought. And yet, it still needs to stand still on paper. This talk approaches and discusses the difficulties - and failures – in trying to transform a dynamic experience into coherent social analysis.

Readings: (de Guevara and Kurowska, 2020)

Further suggested readings: (Dauphinee, 2013; Doty, 2004; Lisle, 2018; Shapiro, 2013)

3. On creating dangerously... and the value of doing a PhD and conducting research – Introduced by Luis Lobo-Guerrero (U Groningen)

In 2013, just after receiving the Nobel Prize on Physics, Peter Higgs stated that ‘no university would employ him in today’s academic system because he would not be considered productive enough’ (The Guardian, 6 Dec. 2013). Einstein, Picasso, Arendt, Heidegger, and many other thinkers would certainly find it difficult to be productive today. This roundtable builds on the inspiration of these great thinkers to reflect on what does it mean to do science and scholarship today. It enters in dialogue with Derrida’s discussion on the (im)possibility of the event (as creation), to think together about the role of knowledge creation, as dangerous enterprise. As Albert Camus argued in his famous essay, the basic principle of free creation is the creator’s faith in himself. How can we exercise this freedom to create whilst doing a PhD and how dangerous is that?

Readings (trying to think of the term ‘artist’ as that of ‘scholar’, and ‘art’, as that of ‘scholarship’): (Camus, 1957; Derrida, 2007; Himid et al., n.d.)

4. Code of failure – Introduced by Amin Samman and Elke Schwarz (City U London/U Lausanne & Queen Mary U London)

Contrary to conventional wisdom, failure does not always entail the breakdown of order. Certainly not today. Failure is intrinsic to the operation of computing and business in various ways and with wide-reaching effects on social reality. Algorithms, machine learning, and Artificial Intelligence proceed through error, updating, and iteration: an endless process of missing the mark. Finance equally obeys a code of failure. Venture capital scales up the logic of waste inherent in entrepreneurship. Stock market valuation requires only present belief in future success. Meanwhile failure accumulates. This session explores the idea of failure as a grammar of contemporary digital capitalism.

Readings: (Kenney and Zysman, 2019; Pasquinelli, 2019)

5. Failing better? International interventions in the Sahel – Introduced by Isaline Bergamaschi (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

This roundtable deals with the ways in which the Western development industry has assessed failure and identified routes to overcome it. Two key dynamics will be elaborated on: the fetishization of sophisticated development tools and technological solutions on the one hand, and the location of responsibility of failure on the "recipient(s)" of foreign aid on the other. One of the outcomes of these is the further justification of ever refined intervention(s) in poor African countries according to new imperatives, from “poverty reduction” to the war on terror”. The roundtable takes Western interventions in the Sahel as a case-study, and also looks at the unprecedented process that has been challenging French postcolonialism and liberal solutions in the region over the past decade.

Readings: (Bergamaschi, 2024)

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