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The Reality of Failure:
On the Interpretation of Success and Failure in (the History and Philosophy of) Science and Technology

"I would prefer not to"
Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener*

Introduction

It is in the study of artefacts and technologies that "success" and "failure" have long seemed the most stable categories. There might be controversies on the value of one scientific theory compared to another, and one can dispute the social successes and failures of persons. However, for artefacts, it appears that to fail or succeed is simply related to whether a thing works, or does not work. This is then a simple pragmatic judgement. In this paper, I discuss the categories of "success" and "failure", and I try to provide some building blocks for a more general theory. Artefacts and technologies will be my main examples, because they represent the hardest case for questioning these categories. Nevertheless, when it elucidates my argument, I will also refer to success and failure in other domains of human life.

For a long time, the history of technology focussed almost exclusively on technological successes. However, for about the last ten years historians have increasingly taken into account technological failures. Indeed, few historians today would consider it appropriate to write success stories of linear technological progress.[1] Yet these new studies do not make clear what failure is, and theorising

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1 See esp. Karel Davids, Successful and failed transitions. A comparison of innovations in windmill-technology in Britain and the Netherlands in the early modern period. *History and Technology* 14 (1998): 225–247. Sean F. Johnston, Attributing scientific and technological progress: The case of holography. *History and Technology* 21 (2005): 367–392. Eda Kranakis, Fixing the blame. Organizational culture and the Quebec Bridge collapse. *Technology and Culture* 45 (2004): 487–518. Gregory C. Kunkle, Technology in the Seamless Web: "Success" and "Failure" in the History of the Electron Microscope. *Technology and Culture* 36 (1995): 80–103. Kenneth Lipartito, Picturephone and the infor-