Born Losers: A History of Failure in America. *By Scott A. Sandage.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. x + 362 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, $35.00. ISBN: 0-674-01510-X.

Reviewed by Jean-Christophe Agnew

Did Scott Sandage ever balk at the prospect of writing a history of failure in American culture? One could hardly blame him if he did. Considering how often we are reminded of capitalism's capacity for creative destruction, we might well wonder just what kind of history there was to be written about the countless, nameless casualties—direct and collateral—of such a relentless, ubiquitous, and fundamentally impersonal process. And even if a story could be told about the millions of men bankrupted and laid off over the past two centuries of the business cycle, what American Dreamer would pay the price and spend the time to read it? The opportunity costs would be, well, incalculable.

But one would be the loser for taking a pass on this book, for Scott Sandage is a historian of exceptional gifts, and those gifts—a rich historical imagination, a keen archival eye, and a carefully crafted prose style—make *Born Losers* a richly rewarding read. "Failure is not the dark side of the American Dream," Sandage writes, but rather "the foundation of it"—a foundation laid down over the course of the nineteenth century (p. 278). The same antebellum market revolution that limited the liability of corporations and chained generations of black-coated Bartlebys to their clerical desks paradoxically imposed an intensely entrepreneurial model of moral accountability upon an increasingly mercantile society. Similarly, the drive to reduce transaction costs elevated transactionalism itself—the ability to make and close deals—as a signature of manhood and a badge of "commercial citizenship" (p. 186). To truck and barter was to fulfill a natural propensity *and* a status obligation. To go broke, accordingly, was to risk the reputation of a born loser.

The career of "failure" as an epithet is, for Sandage, the most vivid Victorian example of the "language of business applied to the soul" (p. 5). The word begins life circa 1800 as a stock term describing a firm's sudden insolvency. By the Civil War the label is fully personalized. Failure, like success, becomes an "achieved identity," a more

or less transparent public offering that leaves buyers openly suspicious of others' overreaching and sellers privately anxious about their own underachievement (p. 39). Moving artfully between the coded credit reports of the new mercantile agencies and the almost equally formulaic—if far more painful—confessionals of diarists and epistolary beggars, Sandage shows how these public and private audits collectively elaborated a generically recognizable narrative of failure nearly a century before Arthur Miller sat down to pen *Death of a Salesman*.

Willy Loman notwithstanding, the argument that Sandage makes is not confined to small stories writ large. Perhaps the most pivotal chapter in the book is his revelatory account of Emancipation's inspiration to the founders of the National Bankrupt Association (1864). Uncannily echoing labor-union opponents of wage labor, Northern soldier-debtors mobilized behind a claim of white slavery—a condition they insisted was worse than chattel slavery—and thereby helped pass in 1867 the first major federal bankruptcy law as a complement to the first of the Reconstruction Acts. Though the racist overtones of this gesture were to persist as late as the GI Bill, Sandage rightly sees the Bankruptcy Act as expanding "the constituency of failure" by "promising a kind of national citizenship" founded on a man's right to transact (p. 215). All men now were, to borrow John Roemer's apt Miltonic paraphrase, "free to lose" (see *Free to Lose: An Introduction to Marxist Economic Philosophy* [1988]).

Why are Sandage's born losers almost all white businessmen? Why are there no tramps, hobos, or bindle stiffs in his post–Civil War "fraternity of failure" (p. 202)? Was working-class fraternity so constituted as to resist the transactional model of manhood and citizenship? Did the failure narrative—like the success story—sound a different chord when read with a mechanic's accent? (see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* [1987]). Sandage sets such questions aside, because for him it was the *businessmen*'s "loss of money and manhood [that] drove legislative, commercial, and cultural solutions that redefined failure" from an institution's insolvency to a man's missed opportunities, lackluster personality, or loss of nerve (p. 4).

This is a persuasive rationale as far as it goes, but how far does it take us into modernity? Yes, we still skitter about in the credit-agencies' "panopticon without walls,"

but we do so now as buyers more than as sellers (p. 148). And much of what we buy or buy into—celebrity culture, for example—is a largely post-Victorian creation, a stage on which the hapless striver of the nineteenth century has been ethnically and racially recast and reinflected. Think only of Bert Williams's Jonah Man or its echo in Al Jolson's Gus. No small part of Arthur Miller's genius was his ability to take a performative tradition that stretched from the Yiddish Lear to Pop Front melodrama and translate it into the generic "American" idiom of a smile and a shoeshine.

Yet the durability of failure's native idiom is just Sandage's point. Scoff as one might at Willy Loman's thirty-five years of employee loyalty, *Born Losers* will surely cause the modern career manager to think twice before calling himself a "company of one." So if Sandage has not closed the book on failure, he has nonetheless closed the scholarly gap between the idea's present and its past. He has filled in that part of failure's ideological family tree extending from the pioneering histories of personal debt and bankruptcy in the early republic by Bruce H. Mann (*Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence,* [2002]) and Edward J. Balleisen (*Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* [2001]) to contemporary sociology depicting a precariously poised middle class, such as Katherine S. Newman's *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (1988) and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989).

And he has done this all with equal measures of insight and elegance. *Born Losers* belongs to that marvelously mixed genre of retrospective ethnography and philosophical meditation that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called "the social history of the moral imagination."

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