

Workshop at the University of Lucerne
28-29 January 2022

Accountability in the Anthropocene

Nadine Arnold, Universität Luzern, nadine.arnold@unilu.ch

Steven Wolf, Cornell University, saw44@cornell.edu

The ‘Anthropocene’ refers to a new geological epoch in which humankind has an unprecedented influence on the functioning of the Earth (Subramanian 2019). The extent of this influence is such that human activity discernibly changes and destabilizes biogeochemical processes (e.g., climate, hydrology, biodiversity) upon which we depend (Biermann et al. 2012). Hence, the Anthropocene implies a fundamental change in socio-ecological relations. This epochal change invites critical reflection on central mechanisms for regulating socioecological relations, given existing conceptions and practices of governance appear incapable of integrating planetary boundaries into socioecological metabolism in a way consistent with sustainability (Blühdorn et al. 2020). In this workshop, we would like to explore this environmental governance challenge through the lens of accountability. In particular, the goal of the workshop is to develop a better understanding of the analytical and practical value of accountability in relation to anthropogenic drivers of global environmental change.

Accountability, which refers to actors’ justifications for (in)actions, external assessments of (in)actions, and follow-on consequences of these assessments helps us investigate governance in the Anthropocene. Here we define governance as systems controls (i.e., information management and operational controls) and systems restructuring mechanisms (i.e., emergence of new values, incentives and sanctions, empowerment of different actors, innovation), which are continuously contested. We can assume that accountability is inherent in every social relationship (Dubnick 2011), and it is for this reason that analysis of accountability makes it possible to trace linkages between diverse organizations, such as government agencies, commercial firms, investors, social movement organizations and research institutes involved in diverse governance arrangements (Kraft and Wolf 2018). Furthermore, accountability enables us to move beyond the context-specific articulation of responsibility, defined as individual self-assertion, care for others, or willingness to accept consequences (Genard 1999). Specifically, the lens of accountability can help to disentangle if and how planetary boundaries (Steffen et al. 2015) are translated into concrete governance structures.

The ways in which accountability are organized and practiced ranges from hierarchical-authoritarian to informal-participatory to gestural-performative (Arnold 2020; Roberts 1991; Sareen and Wolf 2020). Great potential is ascribed to new technical capacity to collect and integrate data at decreasing costs in support of accounting (Bauwens and Pazaitis 2019). At the same time, these same tools present us with modern surveillance states and disturbing questions about autonomy and personal sovereignty in the age of ‘big data’ (Zuboff 2019).

Accountability can be understood as problem rather than a solution. John Meyer (1983) has reminded us that account-giving can serve to celebrate rationality, operating as a great, integrated fiction that has nothing to do with ongoing activities. This means, we must assume that account-demanding and account-giving instruments (e.g., regulations structuring information disclosure, audits, standards and metrics, blockchain) do not necessarily lead to substantive accountability capable of redirecting developmental trajectories. There is clear potential for superficial or hollow accountability, a mode of governance through which accountees and accountors discharge their responsibilities in a manner that conserves socioecological relations by continually minting legitimacy (Wolf 2020). There is a risk, contrary to naïve expectations about the function of governance, that decisions on accountability serve to obscure the assignment of responsibility (Brunsson 1993; Gustafsson 2020). It is in the context of this organizational failure that Perrow (2011) argues we should work to reduce socioenvironmental vulnerabilities by taming politically and economically powerful organizations and strengthening interdependencies. Analytically, we must go beyond accounting for information flows. We must assess if and how accountability mechanisms support recursive processes of changing socioecological relations.

Against this background, a broad spectrum of questions arises relating to the way in which accountability functions as a systems lever that supports feedbacks on ongoing biogeochemical changes, thereby reducing vulnerabilities. But the questions also relate to accountability as a key mechanism through which governments, corporations, investors, critics, and consumers perform engagement with sustainability in order to sustain the unsustainable. Given that these parties use a variety of tools to demand and give accounts, we must ask how these tools regulate socioeconomic relations and shape the envisioned system change? What do these instruments make transparent and sanctionable? Who do they give a voice to and who do they care for? In the context of the Anthropocene, what kind of role does nature play in accountability relationships. Beyond that, and more fundamentally, we need to interrogate the manifest and latent functions of accountability. That is, what are the underlying objectives and motivations of existing accountability mechanisms, and what unintended and unforeseeable consequences do they have on accountees, accountors, and the Anthropocene? Answering these questions requires sharpening our methodological tools and developing an interdisciplinary debate. What theories, concepts, and empirical research strategies allow us to interpret and explain the dynamics of accountability in the Anthropocene?

Literature

- Arnold, Nadine. 2020. "Accountability in Transnational Governance: The Partial Organization of Voluntary Sustainability Standards in Long-Term Account-Giving." *Regulation & Governance*, online first.
- Bauwens, Michel, and Alex Pazaitis. 2019. "P2P Accounting for Planetary Survival." *P2P Foundation, Guerrilla Foundation, and Schöpflin Foundation* [Http://Commonstransition.Org/P2p-Accounting-for-Planetary-Survival/](http://Commonstransition.Org/P2p-Accounting-for-Planetary-Survival/)(Last Accessed 5 February 2020).
- Biermann, F., K. Abbott, S. Andresen, K. Bäckstrand, S. Bernstein, M. M. Betsill, H. Bulkeley, B. Cashore, J. Clapp, C. Folke, A. Gupta, J. Gupta, P. M. Haas, A. Jordan, N. Kanie, T. Kluvánková-Oravská, L. Lebel, D. Liverman, J. Meadowcroft, R. B. Mitchell, P. Newell, S. Oberthür, L. Olsson, P. Pattberg, R. Sánchez-Rodríguez, H. Schroeder, A. Underdal, S. Camargo Vieira, C. Vogel, O. R. Young, A. Brock, and R. Zondervan. 2012. "Navigating the Anthropocene: Improving Earth System Governance." *Science*

335(6074):1306–1307

- Blühdorn, Ingolfur, Felix Butzlaff, Michael Deflorian, Daniel Hausknost, and Mirijam Mock. 2020. *Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit: Warum die ökologische Transformation der Gesellschaft nicht stattfindet*. transcript Verlag.
- Brunsson, Nils. 1993. “Ideas and Actions: Justification and Hypocrisy as Alternatives to Control.” *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 18(6):489–506.
- Genard, Jean-Louis. 1999. *La Grammaire de la Responsabilité*. Paris: Cerf.
- Gustafsson, Ingrid. 2020. *How Standards Rule the World: The Construction of a Global Control Regime*. Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Kraft, Brandon, and Steven Wolf. 2018. “Through the Lens of Accountability: Analyzing Legitimacy in Environmental Governance.” *Organization & Environment* 31(1):70–92.
- Meyer, John W. 1983. “On the Celebration of Rationality: Some Comments on Boland and Pondy.” *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 8(2):235–40.
- Perrow, Charles. 2011. *The next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Roberts, John. 1991. “The Possibilities of Accountability.” *Accounting, Organizations and Society* 16(4):355–68.
- Sareen, Siddharth, and Steven A. Wolf. 2020. *Accountability and Sustainability Transitions*. SSRN Scholarly Paper. ID 3607869. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Steffen, Will, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig. 2015. “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration.” *The Anthropocene Review* 2(1):81–98.
- Subramanian, Meera. 2019. “Anthropocene Now: Influential Panel Votes to Recognize Earth’s New Epoch.” *Nature*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01641-5>
- Wolf, Steven. 2020. “Accountability and the Regulation of Legitimacy: Biodiversity Conservation and Energy Extraction in the American West.” Pp. 89–102 in *Enabling Sustainable Energy Transitions: Practices of Legitimation and Accountable Governance*, edited by S. Siddharta. Palgrave Pivot.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.