THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY
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THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY
What is the essence of politics? Which is the key variable of political science? Common sense gives us a clear answer: it’s power. But as already the classics knew it: In politics, first comes power, then the need to control it. “In framing a government ... the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” Since ancient philosophy, political thinkers have worried about how to keep power under control, how to domesticate it, how to prevent its abuse, how subject it to certain procedures and rules of conduct. Today, it is the fashionable term “accountability” that expresses the continuing concern for checks and oversight, for surveillance and institutional constraints on the exercise of power. All over the world (wherever the term is halfway translatable), international financial institutions, party leaders, grass-root activists, journalists, and political scientists have discovered the blessings and adhere to the cause of “public accountability.” Without doubt, the term sounds well. Its field of application is as broad as its potential for consensus. And its semantic root, the notion of accounting, is nicely ambivalent; it evokes narrative accounts as well as bookkeeping. But do we know what it means? Are we clear about its semantic boundaries and do we comprehend its internal structure? No surprise, my answer is negative: Due to its relative novelty, “accountability” represents an under-explored concept whose meaning remains evasive, its boundaries fuzzy, and its internal structure confusing.

The current essay does not set out to relate the concept to the history of thought. Its pretense is more limited. It aims at reconstructing the meaning of the concept as we currently use it. In essence, it claims that the notion of political accountability carries two basic connotations—answerability, the obligation of public officials to inform about and to explain what they are doing, and enforcement, the capacity of accounting agencies to impose sanctions on powerholders who have violated their public duties. This two-dimensional structure of meaning makes the concept a broad and inclusive one which within its wide and loose boundaries embraces (or at least overlaps with) lots of other terms—such as surveillance,

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1 The Federalist Papers 51.
2 For a brief historical review of moral and institutional solutions to the problem of corrupt power, see Fontana, “The roots of a long tradition”.
3 Richard Sklar even asserts that “[t]he norm of accountability appears to be the most widely practiced of democratic principles” (Sklar, “Developmental Democracy”, p. 714).
monitoring, oversight, control, checks, restraint, public exposure, and punishment—
that we employ otherwise to describe efforts to render the exercise of power a rule-
guided enterprise.

A Two-Dimensional Concept

The attractiveness of accountability derives from its breadth. The concept is a
comprehensive one. Rather than denoting one specific technique of domesticating
power it embraces three different ways of preventing and redressing the abuse of
political power. It implies subjecting power to the threat of sanctions; obliging it to
be exercised in transparent ways; and forcing it to justify its acts. We will treat the
first dimension under the heading of "enforcement" and sum up the last two
dimensions under the title of "answerability". The three aspects together
—enforcement, monitoring, and justification—turn political accountability into a
multi-faceted enterprise which allows to cope with a considerable variety of actual
and potential abuses of power.

Answerability

As with most terms we use in everyday language, we usually assume that we
understand what we say when we talk about “accountability”, and that others do so
as well. Related discussions therefore regularly proceed on the basis of implicit
understandings, without recourse to any explicit definition of the concept. Yet
whenever authors do define the term explicitly, they tend to associate it with
answerability as its “closest synonym”. Accountability, one encyclopedic definition
tells us, for example, is “the ability to ensure that officials in government are
answerable for their actions”. We think this provides a valid starting point. The
notion of “answerability” indicates that being accountable to somebody implies the
obligation to respond to nasty questions, and the other way round, that holding
somebody accountable implies the opportunity to ask uncomfortable questions.

But what kind of answers to what kind of questions? In principle, accounting
agencies may ask accountable actors for two kinds of things. They may either ask
them to inform about their decisions or they may ask them to explain their decisions.
They may either ask for reliable facts (the informational dimension of
accountability) or for valid reasons (the argumentative dimension of accountability).
Accountability thus involves the right to receive information and the corresponding

6 Hickok, “Accountability”, p. 9. See also Sklar, “Democracy and Constitutionalism”.

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obligation to release all necessary details. But it also implies the right to receive an explanation and the corresponding duty to justify one's conduct.7

On the one side, exercising accountability therefore involves elements of monitoring and oversight. Its mission includes finding facts and generating evidence. On the other side, the norm of accountability continues the Enlightenment's project of subjecting power not only to the rule of law but also to the rule of reason. Power should be bound by legal constraints but also by the logic of public reasoning. Accountability is antithetical to monologic power. It establishes a dialogic relationship between accountable and accounting actors. It makes both parties speak, engages both in public debate. It is therefore opposed to mute power but also to unilateral speechless controls of power.8

The etymological ambivalence of accountability—which stems from the double connotation of accounts—sustains both dimensions. Financial accounts contain detailed information prepared according to certain standards of classification and accuracy that make them both readable and reliable for outsiders. Narrative accounts are legitimating tales that present some relieving end as the compelling outcome of previous developments. Or more formally, they represent “definitional transformations of contested action”, “explanations that excuse or justify questionable behavior by proposing a normative status for the behavior”.9 The informational dimension of accountability relates to the first connotation of accounts, bookkeeping, its discursive or explanatory dimension to the second one, storytelling.10

**Enforcement**

Up to now we have described the exercise of accountability essentially as a discursive activity, as a sort of benignant inquiry, a friendly dialogue between accounting and accountable parties. Yet answerability and the double quest for information and justification it implies is not the whole story to accountability.

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7 See Plattner, ibid., and Sklar, ibid. This two-fold answerability refers to past as well as to future acts. Especially in political contexts, accountable agents do no only have to stand up for what they have done (retrospective or ex post accountability) but also for what they plan to do (prospective or ex ante accountability). See also Maravall, “Accountability”, and Schmitter, “The Limits”.

8 In their Postsocialist Pathways, Stark and Bruszt, even if they define accountability as “monitoring” (p. 195), thus equating it with the “informational” dimension, at some places even use the terms “accountability” and “deliberation” interchangeably (e.g. p. 189), thus identifying it with the “dialogic” dimension.


10 Stark and Bruszt emphasize the connectedness of both aspects of accounts. They develop the metaphor of democratic politicians opening accounts, asking voters for credit, and giving accounts in order to maintain their creditworthiness in an original and insightful way (see Stark and Bruszt op. cit. pp. 192-196).
Political accountability involves more than the generation of data and the interplay of arguments. In addition to its informational dimension (asking what has been done or will be done) and its explanatory aspects (giving reasons and forming judgements) it also contains elements of enforcement (rewarding good and punishing bad behavior). It implies the idea that accounting actors do not just “call into question” but also “eventually punish” improper behavior and accordingly, that accountable persons do not only tell what they have done and why, but bear the consequences for it, including eventual negative sanctions. Exercises of accountability that only expose misdeed but remain without material consequences will usually appear as weak, toothless, “diminished” forms of accountability. They will be regarded acts of window dressing rather than real restraints on power.

The “tight coupling” of accountability and the availability of sanctions reflects neo-institutionalist common sense about the conditions of effective institutions. According to much of the new institutionalist literature, rules in order to be effective must be accompanied by mechanisms of monitoring which impede that the eventual violation of rules goes unnoticed (the “informational” function of accountability). But they must also count with mechanisms of enforcement which “get the incentives right” by impeding that acts of cheating go unpunished (the “enforcement” dimension of accountability).学术作家常常非常强调考虑惩罚的能力是政治问责制的一个重要组成部分。学术作家也往往非常强调有效问责制机制对于程序和问责制机构的有效性。例如，在台湾，监察院（负责调查公职人员行为的政府机关）能够“弹劾”一位公职人员——实际上，指控他并在法律当局进一步调查和可能的起诉时将他转交给他。但由于司法部由执政党控制，这意味着高官很少受到严重惩罚。监察院高级官员最希望的结构性变化是独立起诉和对违规官员处以制裁。同样，在尼日利亚第二共和国（1979-1983）期间，有一套复杂的《行为规范》结构来要求官员报告其资产并调查其真实性，以及对贿赂和其他不当行为的指控。然而，行为规范局缺乏足够的人员来调查《行为规范》的违规行为。但见Diamond, "How well is Taiwan’s Democracy Doing?".
officials, and the parallel Code of Conduct Tribunal never sat (because the national legislature never enacted the enabling legislation). As politicians feared no consequences for corrupt behavior, bribery, embezzlement, extortion, vote-buying, and other gross abuses of public office quickly escalated out of control, and generated the public disillusionment with democracy that helped to bring about the military coup of December 1983.  

Concerning the nature of possible sanctions, in the world of politics, the destruction of reputation through public exposure represents one of the main tools of accountability. But the pool of sanctions is much wider. Their severity depends on the severity of the offense. In politics, removal from office often represents the most drastic consequence of misconduct. Both instruments, publicity and dismissal, appear as entirely appropriate punishments for a wide range of bad behavior. But as soon as actors violate legal dispositions neither public criticism nor job loss appear as sufficient. Illegal behavior, such as corruption or human rights violations, calls for appropriate legal sanctions. When presumptive agents of legal accountability, such as the Mexican National Human Rights Commission, for example, do not have persecutory powers but can only issue unbinding statements of advisory character, many observers will feel that the soft and quasi-voluntary version of “accountability light” they practice does not deserve its name and that, in essence, inconsequential accountability is no accountability at all. If a police officer kills someone under his custody without due cause and still walks free, it does not satisfy the principle of accountability if a journalist documents this abuse of authority, or if a human rights ombudsman recommends that the police man be arrested and stand trial. Unless there is some punishment for demonstrated abuses of authority, there is no rule of law and no accountability.

A Radial Concept

We may sum up the preceding reflections in the following one-sentence definition of accountability: A is accountable to B when she is obliged to inform B about her (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct. In experiences of political accountability, usually all three dimensions—information, justification, and punishment—are present. However, they do not form a core of binary “defining characteristics” which are either present or absent, and which must be present in all instances we describe as exercises of accountability. They are continuous variables which show up to different degrees, with varying mixes and emphases. Furthermore, one or even two of them may be missing and still we may legitimately speak of acts of accountability.

15 See Diamond, “Political Corruption"
To begin with, sanctions form an aspect of accountability many consider to be indispensable. Yet some “agencies of restraint” rely in almost pure forms on accountability understood as answerability. For instance, a good number of valuable agencies of accountability, such as the Chilean and the South African Truth Commissions to investigate human right violations under the predecessor regimes, have relied on only a “soft” form of punishment, namely, the public exposure of criminal action. Furthermore, contemporary discussions on the autonomy versus accountability of central banks (e.g. with respect to the fledgling European Central Bank) reveal ideas of accountability which are entirely detached from notions of punishment. Central bankers, if they accept the idea of accountability at all, equate it to the mere need of publicly explaining their decisions after the fact. In general, most expressions of “vertical” accountability where mass media and civil associations act as accounting agencies rely on purely discursive forms of contestation and constraint, with no possibility of applying “negative sanctions” other than public disapproval.\(^{16}\)

The same way accountability may be divorced from sanctions, it may be an exclusive matter of sanctions. Accountability understood as enforcement may be cut off from questions of answerability. The Indonesian students who demanded the demise of General Suharto in early 1998, did not request further information nor did they desire to hear any self-defensive discourses on behalf of the long-reigning president. Or else and less dramatically, the idea of electoral accountability, of voters holding politicians accountable at periodic elections, too, is primarily related to the possibility of punishing past behavior by “throwing the rascals out” (even if between elections incumbents may continually be informing about their actions and justifying them). In the first case, an outrageous as well as transparent violation of social norms makes any additional information superfluous and any additional justification useless, while in the second case, the communicative asymmetries between elite actors and mass publics render any dialogic idea of accountability impractical.

The above examples illustrate that it is possible, in principle, to find instances where the idea of accountability is dissociated from one of its core dimensions — be it enforcement or answerability— without necessarily creating “diminished subtypes” of accountability as a result.\(^{17}\) We conclude accordingly that accountability does not represent a “classical” concept displaying a hard core of invariable basic characteristics. Instead it must be regarded a “radial” concept whose “subtypes” or “secondary” expressions do not share a common core but instead, may lack one or more elements which characterize the proto-typical “primary” “category”.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\)On the distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” accountability, see below.

\(^{17}\)On “diminished subtypes”, see Collier and Levitsky, “Democracy with Adjectives”.

\(^{18}\)On “classical” and “radial” concepts, see Collier and Mahon, “Conceptual ‘Stretching’ Revisited”.\(^{19}\)
A Modest Concept

Political accountability may be a broad and comprehensive concept. But it is also a modest concept. In part, its modesty stems from its potential one-dimensionality. As argued above, certain instances of accountability do not include aspects of answerability, while others go without elements of enforcement. But more fundamentally, political accountability is a modest enterprise insofar as it accepts the reality of power as well as the relative opacity of power.

The Uncertainties of Power

The guiding idea of political accountability is to control political power, not to eliminate it. In this sense, political accountability presupposes power. Far from harboring utopias of power disappearing, withering away, leveled off, the notion enters a world of power. Agencies of accountability strive to keep power from running wild; they strive to bound, to discipline, to restrain it. Their mission is to make power predictable by limiting its arbitrariness and to prevent and redress the abuse of power in order to keep its exercise in line with certain pre-established rules and procedures. The existence of power provides their very raison d'être. Without power, without the capacity to make decisions, and the corresponding capacity to attribute decisions, it does not make any sense to talk about accountability. Nobody can hold anybody accountable for things beyond her control. I cannot hold you accountable for the bad weather (unless I subscribe to pre-scientific meteorological theories), nor can I hold you accountable for the wrong weather forecast (unless you are working in the meteorological office).

We might also say that accountability presupposes personal responsibility. The two terms look very similar and are often treated as close synonyms. Yet if one equates accountability with responsibility to someone one has still to concede that there is no perfect overlap with responsibility for something. In fact, the latter presupposes the former but the inverse is not the case. Accordingly, responsibility for something may go entirely without responsibility to somebody. The premodern absolute ruler could be (and claim to be) responsible for lots of things, but still reject having to respond to anybody (but God and history). In modern times, the presumptive burden of responsibility has become an easy formula to legitimate political power (equivalent to the idea of risk-taking in economic life). And it has also become a formula to shed off prospective accountability: “I am the one responsible so I decide the way I feel I should; I need not tell anybody about it before I take my decision; nor do I have to respond to anybody except to my personal conscience”. In essence, while accountability forces power to enter into a dialogue, the notion of responsibility permits it to remain silent. While accountability builds on the modern idea that power and knowledge are separate
goods, the notion of responsibility allows powerful actors to maintain the illusion that “they know what they do” and therefore, to dismiss irritating questions that do nothing but disturb their solemn and responsible exercise of power.

If accountability indeed addresses agents who detain power with some margin of discretion it follows that it should not be confused with narrow notions of regulation, control, or steering. Holding power accountable does not imply determining the way it is exercised, neither does it aim at eliminating discretion through stringent bureaucratic regulation. It is a more modest project which admits that politics is a human enterprise whose elements of agency, freedom, indeterminacy, and uncertainty, are ineradicable; that power cannot be subject to full control in the strict, technical sense of the word; and that even in a hypothetical world of perfect accountability political power would continue to produce harm, waste, and any other kind of irreversible “public bads” which even ideal agents of accountability could only ascertain, expose, and punish, but neither repair nor make undone.

Agents of accountability want to reach (partial) control over political decision-makers. If they already were in (full) control, their mission would make no sense any more. If I control somebody there is no point of making him accountable to me. Accountable for what? For the things I induce him to do? A robot who assembles automobile parts in a Chrysler factory cannot be considered a plausible addressee of accountability. The same applies for the government official who carries out some decree. She is supposed to do her work well (and may be hold accountable for it) but she is not accountable for the rules she applies. Accountability concerns agents, not subjects. It concerns those who exercise power, not those who are subordinate to it. Or more precisely, it concerns subjects only as far as we ascribe some degrees of freedom to them. In an analogous way, it concerns public employees only as far as we envision administrative organizations not as mechanical conveyor belts of decisions from top to bottom but rather as loci of decision making at all hierarchical levels.

The Opacity of Power

Accountability as answerability aims at creating transparency. By demanding information as well as justification it wants to shed light into the black box of politics. In this, it is similar to notions such as oversight, supervision, and monitoring. But again its project is less ambitious. Agents of accountability do not pretend to supervise everything. In fact, they assume that nothing close to close oversight is taking place and accept that their genuine field of competence are
unobserved and often unobservable actions.\(^{19}\) In this sense, accountability (as answerability) presupposes imperfect information. If the exercise of power would be transparent, there would be no need for holding anybody accountable. The demand for accountability (as answerability) originates from the opacity of power. In a world of perfect information it would be pointless to ask political actors what they have been doing, or intend to do, and why. We would know it already. In Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon any pretense to exercise accountability is void. From its high center, we can see everything and intervene anytime. We do not have to ask anything. We just watch and punish. In the real political world, however, most things are not accessible to direct observation. And even if informational barriers to the political process would not exist, we could still not look into the future (which creates the need for retrospective accountability) nor could we look into decision maker's heads (which creates the need to ask for justifications).

We may add that in part the opaque realms of power agents of accountability are concerned with are the classical *arcanae imperii*, the dark playgrounds of power shut off from public scrutiny for no other reason that the self-contained arrogance of power. At the same time, however, legitimate realms of secrecy exist where decision-makers deliberate and decide behind closed doors. We may think, for example, of central bankers setting exchange rates or court judges forming their judgement. Subjecting such zones of legitimate confidentiality to procedures of accountability does not open them to the eyes of the general public from beginning to end. But it obliges the involved participants to give ex post explanations and reveal the grounds for their decisions to the public.

We should add that most of the time democratic accountability, if it wants to be effective and perceived as such, must be public. As a rule, only public accountability can achieve its aim of curbing power, while confidential accountability, exercised behind closed doors, tends to be perceived as a farce, a caricature of accountability. For example, former President Soglo of Benin disclosing his personal assets secretly,\(^{20}\) hardly qualifies as a champion of accountability.

This "publicity principle" applies not only to accountable actors but also to accounting agencies. This makes accountability distinct from supervision, for instance. The supervisor may remain in the dark, the unseen eye. The agent of accountability must come to the forefront and open itself to second order-observations, the observer observed. In this sense, institutions of accountability are vampires in reverse. They can only live as long as they act in the daylight of the

\(^{19}\) The preceding reflections do not apply for "accountability as enforcement". As we noted above, rule violations may already be in the open as public facts which are neither opaque nor does their punishment add to the transparency of politics.

\(^{20}\) As reported by Galtung, "Developing Agencies of Restraint", p. 11.
public sphere but crumble and die as soon as they enter the shadows of privacy and secrecy.21

The public nature of accountability serves all three aspects of accountability: information, reasoning, and punishment. It does more than bringing the “forceless force of the better argument” (Jürgen Habermas) upon the conduct of the accountable party. It also involves an important form of sanctions. It exposes cases of misconduct to public opinion, which often provokes highly damaging reputational consequences.22

Who Is Accountable for What?

In all walks of life we can hold people accountable for all kinds of things. In our private lives we wade in a constant stream of accountability initiatives. People hold their children, parents, partners, friends, neighbors, colleagues and fellow citizens accountable for any kind of presumptive misbehavior — for political incorrectness, insubordination, disorderliness, bad memory, drinking and smoking, sexual misconduct, sinful behavior, lack of courtesy, strategic errors, factual ignorance, whatever. Since there are lots of rules which guide our private lives there are lots of opportunities for private agents of accountability to step in to monitor and enforce compliance.

Of course, the vast realm of private accountability falls outside the jurisdiction of political science, which is concerned with political accountability in its wide sense, that is, with acts of accountability addressed to public officials, i.e. to the whole personnel employed by the modern state: politicians, civil servants, judges, police officers, military officers, diplomats, etc. In its narrow sense, the term “political accountability” only covers the activities of the professional category listed first: politicians, such as cabinet members, legislators, and party leaders.

Parting from the broad concept of political accountability, which concerns the behavior of any public official, one might introduce a number of further subtypes according to the political subsystems which are to be subject to accountability. The referents and the labels of these subtypes will depend on the analytic distinctions one chooses to draw. A conventional way of slicing the modern political world would produce at least the following broad categories: governmental, legislative, bureaucratic, judicial, and military accountability.

21 Of course, there are exceptions to the general rule of publicity. The “bureaucratic” accountability of subordinates to superiors usually remains an internal affair within the administrative organization concerned. And in some traditional realms of state secrecy, such as foreign intelligence services, accountability, if it takes place at all, does so in a confidential way, closed off to the eyes of the general public.

22 See e.g. Pizzorno, “Representation”, p. 8.
Looking at the *addressees* of accountability (who is accountable?) is one way of ordering the wide field of political accountability. Inquiring into the *criteria* of accountability (accountable what for?) is another one. So, if we hold public officials accountable, what do we hold them accountable for? Which are the yardsticks we use? How do we define good and bad conduct in office? How do we accordingly define the abuse of office that the exercise of political accountability strives to prevent and punish? It is obvious that we may hold public officials accountable for lots of things and that our acts of accountability may be inspired by a many potentially conflicting principles. A quick search through different standards of accountability suggests that we should distinguish at least the following varieties of political accountability (in its broad sense): political accountability (in its narrow sense) assesses the appropriateness of both substantive policies and policy-making processes, but it also brings judgement on the personal qualities of political actors; administrative accountability reviews the expediency and procedural correctness of bureaucratic acts; professional accountability watches over ethical standards of professionalism, such as medical, academic, and judicial professionalism; financial accountability subjects the use of public money by state officials to norms of austerity, efficiency, and propriety; moral accountability evaluates political acts on the basis of prevailing normative standards (independent of formal rules and regulations); legal accountability monitors the observance of legal rules; and constitutional accountability evaluates whether legislative acts are in accordance with constitutional rules.

**Accountable to Whom?**

Who are the agents of political accountability? Who are its social carriers and which its institutional forms? It depends. Different forms of accountability rely on different enforcement mechanisms. The responsibility for exercising both political and moral accountability corresponds to citizens, civil associations, mass media, and opposition parties. Both administrative and financial accountability are often entrusted to specialized agencies, such as Ombudsmen, administrative courts, accounting offices, and anti-corruption organizations. Ethics commissions and disciplinary courts are common institutions of professional accountability. And judicial systems are in charge of guaranteeing legal as well as constitutional accountability. As this quick listing makes clear, distinguishing between different accounting parties constitutes a useful basis for constructing further subtypes of accountability. But we may easily

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21 Much of "professional accountability" pertains to the sphere of civil society. At the same time, however, the category represents a weighty aspect of the accountability of public officials, and the more so, of course, the larger the public sector in a given country.

24 The present volume basically covers the last two forms of accountability: legal and constitutional.
drown in a sea of innumerable agents of accountability unless we drop some conceptual anchor that puts order into the potential proliferation of subtypes. Guillermo O’Donnell’s seminal distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” accountability provides, I think, such a heuristic ordering device.

The notion of “vertical” versus “horizontal” relations of accountability parts from the conventional spatial metaphor of power, the classical image of pyramidal hierarchies: height correlates with resources, “above” equals to power, “below” to powerlessness. In this sense, vertical accountability describes a relation between unequals: it refers to some powerful “superior” actor holding some less powerful “inferior” actor accountable. Or the other way round! The concept is indeterminate in this crucial aspect of directionality. It leaves open whether accountability is meant to flow “top down” or “bottom up”, whether it forms part of the normal exercise of power or whether it implies an inversion of usual power relations. The classical instance of the former is bureaucratic accountability, in which higher-ranking public officials (“principals”) try to control their lower-ranking subordinates (“agents”). In representative democracies, the most important variant of the latter is electoral accountability, in which citizens hold judgement over their representatives through periodic elections.

By contrast, horizontal accountability, taken literally, describes a relation between equals: It refers to somebody holding someone else of roughly equal power accountable. In democratic theory, the division of power—the executive, legislative, and judiciary constraining each other through the classical “checks and balances”—represents its prototypical expression. Yet demanding a “rough equality” of power for “horizontal” relations of accountability establishes a tough criterion, an overly tough one. Power is a (relational) property which is hard to measure and trying to identify instances of “roughly equal” political power in the real world of democratic politics is probably an impossible mission.

In addition, an accounting party, if it is to be serious, cannot stand on equal footing with the accountable party. At least in its sphere of competence, it must be even more powerful. At least within the boundaries of its jurisdiction, which may be very narrow, it must be “legally enabled and empowered” to impose sanctions on

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25 The picture would look even more complicated if we were to include forms of accountability not only to concrete actors but also to ideal, subjectless categories: to history (historical accountability), to our personal conscience (super-ego accountability), to God in heaven (celestial accountability), or to past generations (ancestral accountability). I owe the term “celestial” or “heavenly” accountability to Richard Sklar, “Democracy and Constitutionalism.”

26 See O’Donnell, “Delegative Democracy”. For a similar early conceptualization under the heading of “lateral” accountability, see Sklar, “Developmental Democracy”.

27 Both types of relationship may be modeled along the lines of principal-agent theory (see, for example, Maravall, “Accountability”, Moe, “Political Institutions”, pp. 232-233; Roeder, Real Sunset, Chapter 2, pp. 22-40).

28 Guillermo O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability”.

the accountable party, to punish improper behavior on its behalf. Relaxing the defining criterion of rough "equality" in order to replace it by some looser category such as an approximate "equivalence" of power, does not change this "paradox of horizontal accountability", of specialized agencies holding actors accountable who are immensely more powerful on all accounts except in the agency's specific sphere of competence. Besides, accountability as answerability does not even include the power to punish but only the right to get an answer. In terms of power, it may take place under extremely asymmetric conditions.

Some authors take these methodological and conceptual difficulties into account by complementing the binary spatial metaphor of verticality versus horizontality with some intermediate category, such as "diagonal" or "oblique" accountability. This solution, however, does little to clarify the matter. How should one determinate, in precise terms, intermediate angles of inclination between horizontal and vertical lines of accountability?

If indeed in relations of "horizontal" accountability, the accounting and the accounting party need not possess comparable power resources but in fact may represent actors of grossly unequal powers, it does not seem helpful to comprehend "horizontality" in a literal way as a relationship between actors of "equal" or "equivalent" power. Rather it seems more productive and of more general applicability to stipulate that the accounting party must be independent from the accountable party in all decisions that concern its field of competence. Ideally, both parties form "relatively autonomous powers" which do not stand in a relation of formal subordination or superiority to each other. In other words, horizontal accountability presupposes a prior division of powers, a certain internal functional differentiation of the state.

Defining horizontality in terms of autonomy resolves one main conceptual problem which has accompanied the concept of horizontal accountability. Another one concerns the concept's basic domain of application: Where are the autonomous agents of horizontal accountability to be located? Just in the state? Or also in civil society? It is clear that vertical accountability may take place within the state as well as within civil society and across the boundaries of the two spheres. Tax officials who stage sit-ins in front of the finance minister's office are an example of vertical accountability within the state; union members who accuse their longstanding leaders of corrupt behavior are an example of vertical accountability within civil society; and citizens who vote incumbent parties out of office are an example of vertical accountability running from civil society to state. In principle, horizontal accountability, too, may take place both within and across state and civil society.

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29 See for example, Schmitter, "The Limits".
30 See also Schmitter.
31 O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability" See also Diamond, "The End of the Third Wave", pp. 8-9.
judge citing a military officer to declare before court is an example of horizontal accountability within the state; a journalist denouncing nepotism within the bar association represents an example of horizontal accountability within civil society; and the chamber of commerce questioning the constitutionality of selective price subsidies may count as an example of horizontal accountability from civil society to state.32

The controversial question is, however, whether we should reserve the notion of “horizontal” accountability to intrastate relations, as Guillermo O’Donnell proposes, or else also include civil society actors that hold state agencies accountable into the category, as authors such as Richard Sklar, Philippe Schmitter, David Stark, and László Bruszt suggest.33 Both conceptualizations of horizontal accountability seem quite legitimate. The main objection against the second option of extending the notion of horizontal accountability to civil-society-state relations resides in the structural asymmetry between state and non-state actors. Civil associations may represent strong “factual powers” (poderes fácticos). But they can never match the state’s monopoly of legitimate physical violence, its privileged position as the source of law, of uniform, centrally defined, collectively binding rules. Thus, speaking of “horizontal” relations between the two spheres always looks like something of an euphemism. In addition, ascribing one clear meaning to the notion of horizontal accountability carries the benefit of avoiding conceptual ambivalence. These arguments support Guillermo O’Donnell’s proposal according to which all cases where civil society actors (citizens, civil associations, or mass media) try to hold state agents accountable fall into the category of “vertical” accountability; while the notion of “horizontal” accountability refers (exclusively) to acts of accountability that take place between independent state agencies.

As Robert Pastor, has forcefully reminded us, all the notions of accountability discussed so far share one basic presupposition: They take for granted that political accountability works within the confines of national political systems. As a consequence, they overlook international actors, governmental as well as non-governmental ones, as possible agents of accountability. Since these external actors do not fit easily into the vertical/horizontal dichotomy constructed along the distinction between state and civil-society, they represent, as Robert Pastor puts it, a “third dimension” of accountability.34

32 For an insightful discussion of the many forms, sites, and protagonists of accountability, within the state as well as within civil society, see Sklar, “Developmental Democracy”.


34 Pastor, “The Third Dimension”. 
Second-Order Accountability

When agents of accountability develop into powerful actors, when their criteria of judgement are controversial, and when it is difficult to monitor their performance, the ancient question pushes its way to the forefront: Quis custodiet ipos custodes? Who guards the guardians? Who watches the watchmen? In a more technical language, we face the problem of second-order accountability: How can we hold institutions of accountability accountable themselves? This problem seems particularly pressing with specialized, non-elective, autonomous state agencies which are supposed to pursue their narrow mission of accountability with professional single-mindedness, while they are nevertheless vulnerable to inefficiency and abuse the same way as any other locus of power.35

Of course, one may reformulate the challenge of second-order accountability as a challenge of n-order accountability. Since any second layer of institutional accountability is susceptible to the same kind of failures as the first one we face the possibility of an infinite regress. There are two ways to avoid it. We may establish reciprocal accountability: two agents A and B “check and balance” each other. Or we may establish recursive accountability: A is accountable to B who is accountable to C who is accountable to A again. It is hard to imagine that, at least in the long run, insulated and isolated institutions of accountability can survive unless they are embedded in such recursive cycles or systems of accountability. As Guillermo O’Donnell puts it, “achieving a significant degree of... accountability requires the coordination of several agencies, each of them subject to divide et impera strategies”.36

35 For a refreshing recognition of the need for second-order accountability with relation to Central Banks, against the prevailing mainstream which favors maximizing unqualified Central Bank independence, see Johnson, in this volume, Schürz, “Independence versus Accountability”, and Whitehead, “Models of Central Banking”.

36 O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability”.
Conclusion

Where did our surveying expedition into the structure of meaning of the concept of "political accountability" take us to? Let us sum up the main coordinates of our conceptual journey: Political accountability, we stipulated, represents a broad, two-dimensional concept which denotes both answerability—the obligation of public officials to inform about their activities and to justify them—and enforcement—the capacity to impose negative sanctions on officeholders who violate certain rules of conduct. In experiences of political accountability, both aspects are usually present. Yet instances exist where either the call for sanctions dominates ("accountability as enforcement") or the quest for information and justification ("accountability as answerability"). Given that the notion of accountability is not build upon the illusion that power could be subject to full control and open up to full transparency, but rather accepts and addresses the uncertainty and opacity of power, we characterized it as a modest concept. After clarifying the basic meaning of accountability, we stepped into the vast field of different subtypes of accountability. We sketched some ways of distinguishing different forms of accountability, according to its addresses, its criteria, and its agents. Given its salience in the current literature, our discussion centered on the distinction between vertical and horizontal accountability. It defined the somewhat vague and metaphorical notion of "horizontality" as a relation between state agencies which must possess, rather than equivalent power resources, a certain degree of mutual independence. In general terms, this revision of the concept's semantic field and internal structure should provide useful analytical tools for understanding and advancing academic as well as political discussions on political accountability—this obscure object of political desire and institutional design.
Notes

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