



Business Perspectives on Corporate Accountability for Human and Environmental Rights Violations

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The past twenty years have witnessed a multiplication of legislative initiatives, civil and criminal litigations, and concerted demands by social movements and NGOs across the world to hold economic actors accountable for human rights violations and environmental degradation. An important body of literature has examined these civil society mobilizations, and the ways governments envisage similar processes. Yet we know far less about the ways businesses understand their own rights and duties as legal persons, and their responsibilities as citizens.

This conference aims to revisit the current academic scholarship on corporate accountability by providing a platform for socio-historical analysis of the variety of business actors and their (potentially fragmented and competing) ideas, strategies, and lines of action in terms of enhancing or undermining concrete responsibility for human rights violations and ecological degradation. The existing literature has typically presented corporations as a monolithic bloc, opposing binding regulations and hindering accountability in search for profits. To be sure, many transnational corporations and global business associations continue to defend the neoliberal economic order based on the “rights” of free global markets, posited as the most effective arrangement for fostering international economic and social development. Nevertheless, not all companies are alike. From multinational corporations, to traditional business cooperatives (regrouped, for instance, in the International Cooperative Alliance), to digital platform cooperatives challenging the growth imperative models of Big Tech corporations, to small ecological businesses and Indigenous associative projects, the business world is a complex universe with different views on global economics, sustainability, development, and governance. Moreover, business entities are embedded in different social relations and institutional arrangements, which change over time and place. Indeed, in terms of social identity, no company is “self-same”. Companies deploy different and sometimes contradictory discourses and stories to make sense of their behaviour and action and to manage their relational identities in their ongoing interaction with diverse stakeholders, including

competitors, consumers, employees, contractors, social movements, militaries, and non-state militias, as well as state institutions and networks of governance, operating at different scales.

To better understand how corporate accountability models have evolved since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and what alternative forms of economic production with less devastating consequences for humans, non-humans, and the planet have emerged in the past decades, we need more nuanced socio-historical accounts of how economic actors - of different sizes, scales, sectors, and from different world regions, political cultures, and spaces of unevenly developed capitalism – engage with corporate accountability. Drawing from diverse disciplinary subfields and interdisciplinary areas of study (including but not limited to business history, management and administration studies, behavioral economics, political or economic sociology, anthropology, law & society, international relations), we aim to examine how different economic actors envisage corporate accountability, and connect businesses' perspectives with their different visions of human rights, economic globalization, development, and democracy. We particularly welcome empirical research connected, but not limited, to the following questions:

- How do different business groups and associations shape or react to corporate accountability initiatives, including the negotiation of international and regional treaties, national and transnational litigations, due diligence laws, boycotts, divestment campaigns etc.? And what social, cultural, political, economic, ecological, legal and ethical ideas underpin such reactions?
- Are there any different business approaches to corporate accountability according to different regional/national political and business cultures, different industries, and different size of capital? What role do political regimes play? And are there any differences between companies based in democratic *versus* authoritarian regimes, or different insights from firms (including subsidiaries, subcontractors, and supply/value chains) operating across both types of regimes?
- Does the competition of different companies within the same industry produce progressive orientations towards accountability and legal regulations, or does it produce conformity?
- What methods of compliance or counterattack do businesses employ to respond to civil society organizations' demands for corporate accountability? How do they mitigate the impact of such campaigns, through what methods, and toward what ends?
- How do businesses imagine different methods of self-regulations or models of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cross-sectorial partnerships? To what extent do such measures actually protect or advance human rights and preserve or regenerate the environment?
- What new legal structures for organizing financial, social, and ecological sustainability are businesses pursuing to meet the challenges of corporate accountability, human rights, and ecological degradation?

- What alternative business models - more friendly to human rights and the environment – have emerged in the past three decades, and who was at the lead of these initiatives? What is the role of grassroots and indigenous economic actors in developing these alternative models? How are these models perceived by multinational corporations and what potential do they have to reform or alter the dominant neoliberal discourse?

We define corporate accountability as a large spectrum of strategies aimed at preventing and sanctioning business actors for their complicity/participation in gross human rights violations, including, among others, advocacy for regional and international treaties and national legislation, criminal and civil litigations, boycotts, divestment campaigns, and truth commissions. In general, we agree with critical scholarship challenging Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or business self-regulation as an alternative to binding legal agreements, as such instruments had so far a weak effect on the improvement of human rights record. However, we are interested in how businesses themselves legitimize such instruments and assess their impacts.

Please submit your proposal including authors' names, email addresses and affiliations, a short CV and an abstract of around 300 words by 20 July 2024. The organizers will provide a response by 30 July 2024. Selected participants will be invited to submit their papers (max. 7,000 words including tables, figures, and references) by 1st March 2025. A selection of papers will be published in English, in a special issue of an international academic journal or an edited volume. Please submit paper abstracts to: corpaccount@politice.ro. For additional information, please contact Raluca Grosescu (ralucagrosescu@gmail.com) or Mariuca Petre (mariuca.petre@politice.ro).

Funding opportunities for travel and accommodation are available, although to a limited extent. We thus kindly ask contributors to explore funding opportunities at their home institutions.

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