

PART VI

RETHINKING ACCOUNTABILITY

The recent attention given to accountability in all its various forms has created an interest in—and demand for—a more basic rethinking of how accountability relates to political and social life in general. In this section we offer four works that explore some of the fundamental questions raised by our increasing obsession with accountability.

In her examination of “Accountability in Two Non-Western Contexts,” Sara Jordan notes the universal desire for accountability, but demonstrates that this “does not translate automatically into a universal definition of accountability or universal approval of the methods of exacting accountability.” Her exploration begins with a distinction among the major variants (liberal, liberal-communitarian, and communitarian) of the western tradition and then proceeds to describe two non-western perspectives (ritual and affective accountability) drawn from east Asia and central-west Africa. The contrasts are striking, and their implications for a increasingly global perspective on accountability are significant.

In “Accountability and the Theory of Representation,” Ciarán O’Kelly considers the underlying views of representation that underpins the principal-agent relationships that inform most of our thinking about accountability. Focusing on the example of corporate governance, his analysis highlights the fact that issues of accountability transcend sectoral boundaries and deal with problems a good deal more substantial than those of managerial or democratic (e.g., shareholder) control. Viewing accountability as mechanisms of representation, O’Kelly argues, alters our understanding of the current scandals and crises plaguing our globalized corporate economy.

While O’Kelly’s efforts are aimed at reconsidering accountability within the context of the political theory of representation, Kaifeng Yang offers a different approach that generates insights about accountability from within the social meta-theory of structuration. Relying primarily on the widely cited work of Anthony Giddens, Yang deals with the limited view of accountability as a principal-agent relationship by highlighting the complex roles and functions accountability plays in simultaneously regulating and constituting accountable behavior. Operating as both means and ends, accountability within the context of the Giddens’s structuration framework is an ever “emergent” factor in social and political relationships. Viewed in this light, we gain a greater appreciation of both the growing significance and complexity of our subject.

With accountability becoming so pervasive in the world of governance (public, private and nonprofit), Dubnick and O’Brien focus attention to our collective “obsession” per se. Why are we so preoccupied with accountability as either (or both) the cause or cure of our policy and governance problems? What does this obsession tell us about how we think about—and expect from—greater or enhanced accountability? What are the implications of this general obsession when applied to policy design—and specifically to the efforts to reform financial markets in light of the recent (2007–2010) economic collapse?

For those concerned with making practical sense of accountability and the challenges it poses for the day-to-day work of governing, the works in this section might initially seem overly abstract and of questionable “practical” value. And yet such efforts to theorize about and rethink accountability have already paid dividends, for only by constantly framing and reframing this salient feature of modern governance are we able to enrich the understanding of those who daily face the challenges posed by the promises of accountability.