Call for abstracts:

Interdisciplinary workshop

Anticipatory Governance in the Anthropocene: Opacity, Cybernetics, and Resilience

November 4th and 5th, 2024

Fulda University of Applied Sciences

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The puzzle

Anticipatory governance, i.e. ways of governing that prevent or limit problems, conflicts and natural disasters before they occur, is at a premium today when catastrophic events and (armed) conflicts seemingly occur without warning. But, while it is more necessary than ever, it seems to be much more difficult to achieve. This is because the polycrisis is not governable in modernist ways, i.e. in cause-and-effect approaches that work on linear crisis scenarios of prevention, mitigation, and response in separated policy fields. These no longer work in our contemporary times - described as the Anthropocene.

Anticipatory governance in the polycrisis requires to take into account various entanglements, rely on a more systemic approach, think in networks, include contexts, and take into account that there is no effect of a policy or action that does not also have a side-effect. This thinking is at odds with a policy field tradition that is used to cause-effects models and separating fields, with e.g. healthcare, nature protection and economics being separated portfolios. But today, it is no longer possible to separate out, to compartmentalise, different problems and solutions, the world is too entangled and interrelated. If what matters is specific context and relations, then it is not possible just to import knowledges, policies, organisational procedures, and technologies from elsewhere into separate fields.

The potential gains of anticipatory governance are huge, but also the challenges to put it into effect. We are required to govern in anticipatory ways in relation to crises such that we move forward rather than merely maintain the equilibrium, attain stability, or return to a state of normality that no longer exists (and probably triggered the crises). We know we cannot be passive and merely address problems and threats reactively. We also know that entanglement means that there are no clearcut and easy separations between how we govern ourselves and the societal and environmental impacts of problems. Anticipatory governance is then not merely a matter of specific policy knowledge or emergency response coordination but of enhancing our *capacities of self-organisation that not only includes humans but also their societal and natural environment*. **We wish to explore exactly what this might mean in practice.**

How do societies and communities adapt and grow in relation to the complex threats and problems of the age of the "polycrisis"? How does anticipatory governance work when what is crucial are specific capacities and relationships? What does self-organisation mean at different levels and scales? If small differences can have major consequences for effects and outcomes, how is it possible to prioritise concerns? What knowledge can we gain from analysing ways in which social and community responses have emerged in relation to crises and problems? We seek to start from the current state of the art in the field of anticipatory governance and are interested in comparative study of conceptualisations, policies and practices across a wide range of policy areas, from *disaster response* to *community development*, to *post-conflict peacebuilding*.

We seek to focus upon three themes:

Opacity. The starting point for anticipatory governance is the fact that crises are context sensitive. Crises elicit different responses in different communities, just as individuals differ in their responses to problems. It is therefore not always possible to tell merely from appearances (or statistical analysis or social, economic, and political breakdowns) how responses are shaped and why, let alone which crisis reaction leads to which outcome. Societies, individuals, and communities in this often appear as black boxes. How does opacity appear in policy thinking and how is it responded to? How are the black boxes of societies, individuals and communities – the realms of opacity – conceptualised (or not) and dealt with? What does this mean for anticipatory governance? We seek papers that examine the problem of opacity as it appears for policy concerns and for policymakers. We are particularly interested in drawing together comparisons between cases where opacity is minimised or denied and where opacity is seen to be a central problem.

Cybernetics. How do we open up the black box? How do we access the internal relations that differentiate, or ground, responses in complex contexts and systems? What methodologies and approaches are required? It seems that anticipatory governance approaches share much with the broad field of cybernetics and systems theory dealing with non-linear outcomes, i.e. how problems elicit different responses. Since the work of early cybernetics theorists such as Ross Ashby and Norbert Weiner, societies have been conceptualised in 'black box' terms enabling experimental social research in terms of input and output analysis. How does a cybernetics approach inform work seeking to see societies in the more mobile and developmental terms of transformation, rather than with the aim to maintain an equilibrium? How may cybernetics help societies develop and transform in the face of shocks?

Resilience. We think that shaping our discussion of anticipatory governance from the starting point of opacity, locating the problem as one of lack of access to internal relations in communities that differentiate responses (making outcomes non-linear) is key. The focus is then on the inner relations of societies, communities, and individuals rather than upon merely the inputs – policies of prevention – or the outputs (effects) – emergency responses after the event. If the black box, i.e. the part that brings the mediation between the input and the output is key, anticipatory governance works with the problems of opacity, of mediation, and of relation. This work can feed into analysis of broader, dominant, policy discourses. These are often labelled in terms of "resilience" – generally speaking, this concept emphasises a system´s capacity to self-regulate when confronted with external shocks. In light of the above reflections, these resilience-oriented policy discourses can then be seen to be often hampered by a confusion over how processes can be conceptualised because they make (implicit) assumptions about the insides of the black box.

Public Keynote lecture on Monday Nov 4th, 18:00

Prof. Dr. Thomas Lemke, Goethe University Frankfurt:

Technologies of anticipation. Investigating practices of future-making in contemporary societies

Please do send your abstract until August 18th, 2024 to

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The workshop is fully funded for accepted papergivers, including travel and accommodation.