

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

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The puzzle

Anticipatory governance, i.e. ways of governing that prevent or limit problems, conflicts and natural disasters, acting 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 cuts and separations that enabled linear and predictive cause and effect crisis scenarios - of prevention, mitigation, and response in separated policy fields - are no longer possible. We understand this lack of separability – across time and space – to be central to concerns of ‘polycrisis’. To clarify the stakes at play in questions of relation, entanglement and interconnection, across the human and environmental fields, our contemporary times are often described as the Anthropocene.

Anticipatory governance in the Anthropocene requires taking into account various entanglements and the development of a more systemic approach that thinks in networks, includes contexts, and realizes that any effect of a policy or action will also have a side-effect. This thinking is at odds with a policy field tradition that is used to cause-and-effect models and separating fields, with e.g. healthcare, nature protection and economics being distinct portfolios. 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 knowledge, 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 clear cut 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 in the age of polycrisis or Anthropocene? 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 thus often appear as black boxes (all the key workings are inaccessible, beneath the surface). How is this problematic of opacity approached or addressed in policy thinking? 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 hope to explore ‘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 will need to learn much from existing work within 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 Wiener, societies have been conceptualised in ‘black box’ terms enabling experimental social research in terms of input and output analysis. How might the field of cybernetics inform work seeking to govern through anticipatory modes? How is it possible to conceive of societies in 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? How do we deal with questions of scale? At which level are responsive and anticipatory interventions most necessary?

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 the ways in which internal relations in systems may differentiate responses across time and space (making outcomes non-linear), is key. The focus is then on the inner relations of societies, communities, and individuals and their interrelations with the non-human world around them rather than upon merely the visible inputs – policies of prevention – or the measurable outputs (effects) – impact of the crisis and emergency responses after the event. Engaging the analytic of resilience in the context of anticipatory governance enables this project to work with these problematics differently. Both concepts, resilience and anticipatory governance, are often focused upon in policy circles, however, there is little connection between the discussions. Anticipatory governance usually focuses upon predictive, strategic, futural engagements, usually concerning high-level governance actors; resilience approaches tend to concern local community preparedness for regularly occurring events. These tend to be at the forefront rather than the relations, i.e., communities tend to be fixed and homogeneously drawn as are the problems/threats/crises. In our discussion of resilience, we thus seek to place relationality at the centre. We are interested in working through the implications of this approach.

Venue

[Hochschulzentrum Fulda Transfer](#)

Heinrich-v.-Bibra-Platz 1b - Großer Seminarraum 3a

37037 Fulda

Sunday Nov 3

Arrival and dinner at 19:00 at [Alte Schule](#), Jesuitenplatz 2, 36037 Fulda

Monday Nov 4

9.00 Welcome

Claudia Wiesner (Fulda), Pol Bargaés (Barcelona), David Chandler (Westminster)

9.30 – 11.00 Panel 1: Opacity

Mareike Schomerus (Busara): Opacity as mental model: Linking humans to their processes in anticipatory governance

Adam Day (Geneva): Decision-making in the Dark: How Opacity Shapes Policy

Break

11.30 – 13.00 Panel 2: Cybernetics and processes

Jan Pospisil (Coventry): The Enduring Transition: Engagements with South Sudan's Polycrisis

Jonathan Joseph (Bristol): Anticipatory Governance and Resilience: Lessons from Korea

Lunch break

14.30 – 16.00 Panel 3: Resilience

Chris Zebrowski (Loughborough): Anticipating Collapse in the Anthropocene: Calibrating Resilience for Global Polycrisis

Claudia Morsut (Stavanger): Is anticipatory governance making the EU more resilient to polycrises?

Break

16.30 – 17.30 Conceptualising anticipatory governance - discussion

Key issues and possible responses

Comment by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda) and discussion

Break

18.00 – 19.30 Evening Lecture

Thomas Lemke (Frankfurt): Technologies of anticipation. Investigating practices of future-making in contemporary societies

Dinner at [Restaurant "Dianakeller"](#), Pauluspromenade 2, 36037 Fulda

Tuesday Nov 5**9.30 – 11.00 Comments and post-lecture discussion on anticipatory governance**

Comments by David Chandler (Westminster), Jessica Schmidt (Fulda), Tom Scheunemann (Fulda)

Break

11.30 – 13.00 The future of anticipatory governance / Agenda for future work

Comments by Pol Bargués (Barcelona) and Niilo Kauppi (Helsinki)

Lunch and departure



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