Accountability and Stakeholder Engagement: Politics and Accounting in Dialogue to Improve Democracy

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Chapter 3

Accountability and Stakeholder engagement: politics and accounting in dialogue to improve democracy

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Keywords

Accounting, accountability, power, communication, democracy, social responsibility, dialogue, fraternity, stakeholders engagement, interdisciplinary approach, emancipatory change, structures , relationships, expectations, styles of accountability, accounting for the other, citizens, reasonableness, policy implications, stakeholders' map, ethical Firm System Theory, decision-making processes, competitive interests, legitimisation, management, public administration, measurement, quantitative , qualitative outcomes.

Abstract

Starting from the following provocation: "The potential for authentic social and environmental accountability through organised crowd-sourced participation accessible to all citizens with a stake in a sustainable future is under explored." (Bebbington et al, 2017: 12). This chapter has the objective of reflecting upon the contribution of accountability through two disciplines, the first of which is politics and the second accounting, to promote emancipatory change and democracy.

1.Introduction

In accountability definitions there are a lot of meanings, that are composed by technicalities and qualitative narratives, with social and relational implications in governance processes.
It is acknowledged that there is a responsible and transparent method of reporting in which, through rather strict rules, it is necessary that, in the face of expenses, revenues must be indicated in an organic fashion. In fact, ever since the Assyrians and Babylonians, traders have described their ways to keep the accounts "in good order" (Pacioli 1987).
The eccessive approach about technicalities had been criticized (Munro and Mouritsen 1996; Boland and Schultze, 1996), because create an eccessive focus on figures instead of relations (Kamuf, 2007).
At the same time, narrative contents of accountability became more and more long and complex. Stakeholders instead of being informed, get lost reading to the hundreds of pages concerning the financial statements and other types of "not financial information", that can be derived from different models and that take different names with partially different contents, such as: environmental, social, social responsibility, mission, sustainable, integrated.
In this panacea of information variously expressed through: graphs, numbers, tables, reports, the reader in a certain sense loses, or rather loses, the sense of the "whole" that is the

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company, without often being able to draw an overall but only partial vision. The partial vision derives from narratives that communicate only the positive information of the firm impact of stakeholders and environment and several times bypassing the negative aspects.

This process is called "greenwashing", that is, a brushstroke of paint and everything becomes beautiful, hiding, however, what is negative towards the community the company is implementing: conditions of employees; environmental pollution, etc.

The concept of giving an appropriate account then leads to the objective not only of highlighting the positive aspects: education and solidarity programs, measures to reduce the negative impact on the environment, etc. but of wanting with this information to "manipulate" stakeholders to convince them of the good work of the company even if it clearly creates damage to health or addiction because the product cannot be changed.

Moreover, more equilibrium among technicalities and narratives in accountability is required(Editorial -SI Accountability and Accounterability, Critical Perspectives on Accounting 23 (2012) 177– 182).

This because: "the importance and power of accountability in the development and discharge of democracy" (Gray et al, 1997 p. 327) is the key question that is involving populism and conflicts among stakeholders and Institutions.

In politics, as analysed in the previous chapter, the phenomenon of populism (understood as having a pejorative meaning with respect to people or community) is considered from a political and party perspective (Boroviak 2011).

The research question is: "What are the main aspects in common and the different ones in the accountability considered in policy and in accounting discipline?"

This work offers some reflections in theory to the necessity to rethink the paradigm, according to which organisations are considered, and which accountability models could be useful to give a more complete view of the results and of the impact on them.

This current research design considers the literature review using an inter-disciplinary approach, both political and accounting. This perspective tries to involve these two disciplines in a "dialogue" throughout accountability. The aim of the work is to clarify the concept of accountability, that is defined in different, and sometimes misleading, ways.

2.Accountability: conceptual network considering the politics approach

In this section, we tackle the theme of accountability from the viewpoint of politics (Baggio 2013). The concept of accountability comes out of an auspice, underlined by some writers, amongst whom is Ascani (2014), of broadening consensus to a *modus operandi* of politicians, which may go beyond the usual term in office but which investigates a wider vision as well as a longer-term one. This long-term "strategic vision" requires a knowledge greater than that required for those actions which are limited to a short term, and related to the term in office. Accountability might provide important backing to make government activities more transparent and responsible.

Besides, Ascani (2014) underlines the need for accountability which shows itself at both world and European level. At world level, particularly in those continents, which to a greater extent suffer from poverty and corruption, some scholars underline the importance of responsibility by government bodies of the various states in promoting greater participation of various social groups. However, it can be found a great difficulty in making the political-decisional process a participatory one, indeed: "Democratic accountability should ensure that choices

about creating public value are based on broader consensus by local residents. But this is far from the case in many African countries." (Hogan and Idowu 2021, p. 815).

Such difficulties of participation have been described and challenged by various scholars in politics and "fraternity" was proposed as a principle fundamental to start off possible solutions to those problematic issues outlined above (Baggio 2013). In this context, we have not got the space to treat such a factor, though we will try to consider this as a factor to keep in mind in accountability as well.

Yet another scholar (Borowiak 2011) highlights accountability as challenge for shining a light on responsibility and control in international bodies.

At a European level, however, political representation is dissolved within its complex functioning mechanisms. Even if, with regard to the international situation, a voluntary process of legitimisation, which reverberates within a representative democracy, however exists in this context.

All this in that, following the thinking of Rousseau (1755), the State is of human construction and therefore it might also take not-exactly democratic "turns" like those dictatorial ones. Accountability refocusses our attention on responsibility and control, thus making those "turns" we referred to all the harder. This in that, according to Schedler (1999) the importance of recognising one's own limitations by way of accountability permits us to underline responsibility and the need for comparison and debate. Such comparison and debate are necessary to increase the awareness of one's own limitations and one's own actions. Moreover, by way of the relational dimension of comparison and debate, individual limitations are shared and the results go beyond those previously foreseen individually.

Accountability becomes the control mechanism for excess of power and brings our attention back to repreentative democracy (Asacni 2014). This in that in order to make democracy a reality, forms of representation must be applied and upon representation accountability is grafted. Indeed, the following is most interesting: "…La lotta per la propria potenza, e la responsabilità personale per la propria causa che da questa deriva, è l'elemento vitale del politico come dell'imprenditore" *(…The struggle for one's own power, and the personal responsibility for one's own cause which comes from it, represents the vital element of the politician as much as of the entrepreneur.)* (Weber 1982, p. 38-39). This aspect will later be taken up again with regards treatment of accountability from the company perspective.

Even the proposal and the spreading of New Public Management which, ever since the eighties, tries to include criteria of economic efficiency borrowed from private companies, do not substitute accountability. Rather, according to some authors (Larbi 1999) this line of thought has demonstrated a certain crisis. Ascani (2014) underlines that in this way, even increasing efficiency, that which has been lost is precisely accountability in the meaning of: demand, legitimisation and control.

This in that trusting the provision of certain services to private companies has matted the role of politics (Borowiak 2011).

The contribution of accountability is based on the development of a constructive reasoning, so that on the part of political bodies it is not enough to "show off" a motivation that is purely charismatic but it is necessary to transmit information in a transparent way to empower the masses, or to make people informed of the results of the work of these bodies.

Accountability in political discipline pertains to a "necessary" process for those who hold a public political role, such as: president, mayor, member of parliament, etc. Public political roles are the result of elective mechanisms that lead these subjects to manage resourses and assets on behalf of the people who elect them. So: "Those who hold a public political role, in

fact, must not be considered accountable only for what pertains to the single mandate that is entrusted to them from time to time, but also … for long-term consequences of their final results of perspectives project and work" (Ascani 2014, p. 14).

Ascani (2014) offers a broad examination of the history of the term and concepts of accountability, in particular referring to its political meaning, to avoid the drifting of misleading meanings.

The perspective of political accountability analysis develops from international concepts (Boroviak 2011; Dubnick 1996) to a greater focus referring to the EU (Schmidt 2004).

The following definition of Accountability in politics may be considered: "By accountability, …, we mean mechanisms of demand, argumentation / justification and control ..." (Ascani 2014, p. 40).

Other definitions of accountability may also be pondered, amongst which is: «A è accountable verso B quando A è obbligato ad informare B circa le proprie azioni (passate e future) e le proprie decisioni, a giustificarle / spiegarle e a subire punizioni / sanzioni nel caso di un'eventuale cattiva gestione» (*A is accountable to B when A is forced to inform B regarding its own actions (past and future ones) as well as its own decisions, to justify / explain them and to be subject to punishment / sanctions in the case of eventual bad management*) (Mulgan 2000, p. 555). Moreover, we may consider also how: ‹‹quei meccanismi che regolano la relazione tra governanti e governati, rappresentanti e rappresentati, che vincolano i primi a rendere i secondi edotti delle azioni intraprese per loro conto (nel loro interesse) e consentono ai secondi di giudicare e, eventualmente, intraprendere azioni contro i primi, sulla base delle informazioni e delle giustificazioni ricevute›› (*those mechanisms which regulate the relationship between rulers and ruled, representatives and represented, that commit the former to make the latter aware of the actions undertaken on their behalf (in their interest) and allow the latter to judge and, eventually, take actions against the former, on the basis of information and explanations received.)* (Dubnick 2008, p. 11; Ascani 2014, p. 25).

Accountability in politics is fundamental in constructing trust between those who govern and those governed.

Accountability, according to other authors, amongst whom is Shedler (1999) represents ‹‹la capacità di assicurare che i pubblici ufficiali e i governanti rispondano delle loro azioni e ne diano giustificazione›› (*the capacity of ensuring that public officials and rulers answer for their actions and justify them*) (Schedler 1999, p. 14; Ascani 2014, p. 26). Its fundamental basis may be found in responsibility and responsibilisation. In such a way, a concept of "control" is also included within accountability. Necessary control in order to justify and verify the conduct of those players with political power.

Indeed, in this sense: "Così, l'accountability non mira affatto a riconsegnare integralmente al popolo il potere che da esso viene trasferito ai suoi rappresentanti, ma vuole, piuttosto, costruire un ponte tra i governanti e i governati, istituendo un dialogo costante e dando vita ad una reale condivisione" (*Thus, accountability does not minimally aim at integrally devolving, to the people again, the power that from them is transferred to their representatives, it wishes, rather, to construct a bridge between rulers and ruled, establishing a continual dialogue and giving life to real sharing)* (Ascani 2014, p. 35).

Accountability is important for the functioning of democracy yet is to be harmonised with all other aspects of the political and democratic process.

The concept of accountability in politics specifically refers to the relationship between rulers (representative institutions) and ruled (citizens). Passing on those aspects relating to horizontal accountability (between peers) and vertical accountability (with hierarchical

differences among the various interested parties) (Ascani 2014, p. 42), we rest on that electoral one and on the various stages in which it develops. The first stage concerns the investigation of the candidates who may be elected. They listen to the citizens, understand their needs and would bear and carry them on should they be elected. The second stage begins following the election and regards the discharging of their electoral mandate. This means the concrete implementation of all that was promised during the voting stage. Whenever decisions on issues different from those that came up during the pre-electoral listening phase, a new consultation is required, one which has such themes as its focus. The third stage regards providing for argumentation and justification, i.e "being accountable" for that which they were able to consider throughout the electoral mandate, or that which, instead, they were not able to consider. In this latter stage, accountability plays the role of mediator and of making the citizens knowledgeable of the various passages during the time in office and verifying the consensus obtained. In bureaucratic accountability, on the other hand, reference is made to the possibility, for politicians, of verifying the behaviours of the officials within the public administration, including those aspects of ethics and professional deontology that are involved in the activities carried on by them (Jackson 2009).

Institutional accountability, however, rests on the division of powers into legislative, executive and judicial powers (Montesquieu 2011 (orig. ed. in 1748) which holds to the aim of verifying the balance between them.

In politics, the tools used in accountability include: those organs provided for by the constitution, the courts of justice, organisations that act as stimulation element of the consensus of citizens, etc.

Moreover, the presence of the "being accountable" in politics has a meaning which concerns the presence of a perpetual interaction and dialogue among those that should allow being questioned on their conduct and on their way of operating and the citizens who should have an active role of information requests to their representatives in the government (Ascani chap. 1). The conceptualisation and realisation of an accountability that can guarantee democracy is one of the most important challenges to the current state of the art in a globalised world (Borowiak 2011).

Finally, another element should be inserted, about the dimensions of dialogue in politics. Among them, "fraternity" is suggesting one way to improve it, as is better explained in the next sections. That, because, during times, liberty and equality, coming from French Revolution, had been implemented but fraternity must be considered in politics and in accountability: "The fact that fraternity is the universal human condition and that it refers necessarily to liberty and equality does not mean at all that these are historically acquired, or that the fraternal condition is always a harmonious and peaceable one." (Baggio, 2013 p. 48). Once having presented accountability from the viewpoint of political sciences, in the following section the discussion considering the accounting viewpoint is proposed.

3.Accountability: conceptual network considering an accounting approach

In this section, we wish to analyse the meaning of accountability in the discipline of accounting.

The analysis considers the following dimensions, the first of which concerns some general definitions of accountability. The second dimension particularly considers recent thoughts and research which have involved the public administration, even in exceptional times, like that of the current COVID-19 pandemic. To these two dimensions we need to include a third

which considers the relationship between ethics (Rusconi 2019) and accountability. This third dimension will be introduced by way of the thoughts of Shearer (2002). On conclusion of the section, which completes the analysis of accountability.

As regards the first dimension, we choose to define accountability by categorizing it within Social Accounting[25]. The fact remains that the social and non-neutral function of accounting is recognized also by scholars who mainly refer to financial accounting (Hines 1989; Hopwood 1987).

The choice of using Social Accounting has been carried out, in that hermeneutic and emancipatory characteristics are to be found in it. As regards the aspects relative to the hermeneutic process, we may consider: "hermeneutic dialectic process" (Laughlian and Broadbent) which seeks out a means that might lead us towards reflexive mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders." (Gray et al. 1997, p. 329). The emancipatory characteristic, instead, consists in the possibility of intervening, via the information coming from reporting, on the distribution of powers within society and, therefore, it may contribute to the improvement of democracy. This aspect, according to Gray et al. (1997) is covered particularly by accountability, as can be read: "This emancipatory moment lies beyond the accountability itself and, rather, underpins the project and provides its motivation. The project seeks to enhance the democratic virtues of transparency and accountability" (Gray et al. 1997, p. 329). The quotation opens up to the ethics dimension which we will examine as the third part of the section.

Within Social Accounting the concept of Accountability was developed by Gray et al. (1997): "Accountability ... is concerned with the relationships between groups, individuals, organizations and the *rights* to information that such relationships entail. Simply stated, accountability is the duty to provide an account of the actions for which one is held responsible. (For more detail see, e.g. Gray *et al.* 1986, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1996b). The nature of the relationships – and the attendant rights to information – are contextually determined by the society in which the relationship occurs." (Gray et al. 1997, p. 334).

Following social accounting theory, accountability contributes to «emancipatory» change of the society (Gray 1989; Hines 1989; Brown and Dillard 2014; Bebbington et al. 2017, 2021).

Accountability, according to the discipline of accounting, is defined as being in tight relation to the informative system for the internal and external financial reporting of the company as well as to the tools that allow its development (Marchi 1993).

In this sense, other definitions may be considered. Among which is that proposed by Matacena 2002), who writes thus: "L'accountability esprime la responsabilità informativa dell'azienda medesima e si sostanzia in quel sistema di comunicazioni, interne ed esterne, che nella trasparenza e nel controllo d'esito trovano la loro piena conformazione…" (*Accountability expresses the informative responsibility of the company itself and is embodied in that communicaton system, both internal and external, which in transparency and control of outcome finds its full structure*) (Matacena 2002: 146).

The author underlines responsibility in measuring but also in transparency and control. In his writings, Matacena (2010; 2017) affirms the importance of connecting accountability to the mission and governance of the company while considering such combinations throughout the

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[25] Please read: "Social accounting is used here as a generic term for convenience to cover all forms of accounts which go beyond the economic and for all the different labels under which it appears - social responsibility accounting, social audits, corporate social reporting, employee and employment reporting, stakeholder dialogue reporting as well as environmental accounting and reporting." (Gray, 1999, pp. 2 and 3)

various typologies of companies. This combination of mission, governance and accountability as a unitary body is linked to company policies (Bertini 2013, 4th edition).

Not far from the preceding author's position, Rusconi affirms: "… si può intendere l'accountability come il dovere e la responsabilità di spiegare, giustificare, a chi ne ha diritto, che cosa si sta facendo per rispettare gli impegni presi con gli interlocutori, sia sul piano economico-reddituale … sia da altri punti di vista" (*accountability may be understood as the duty and the responsibility of explaining, justifying, to whomever is entitled to it, what is being done to respect commitments undertaken with stakeholders, both at economics and income level and from other viewpoints.)* (Rusconi 2002, p. 229). Rusconi (2002) considers accountability linking it to both definitions mentioned prevously.

Moreover, he divides the concept of direct accountability from that of indirect accountability. Direct accountability makes reference to the tools of measurement such as financial, social, environmental, sustainability, integrated, etc. statements. Instead, for indirect accountability he mainly considers social and environmental certificates the company manages to obtain (Balluchi and Furlotti (eds) 2019).

In these definitions the importance is underlined of considering one typology of accounting that is not necessarily "financial" in nature but which is able to measure, within the company informative system, all aspects of the relationship between company and environment and, therefore, also those concernining society and environment. In support of this, it is necessary to underline social (Idowu (ed.) 2021), ethical and environmental responsibility, within the various stages of predisposition of company outcomes (Baldarelli 2005).

Another important definition mainly underlines the activities of control under which the subjects, who are part of the social system, have to undergo: "When individuals are involved in these social systems they are accountable for their actions due to the existence of a shared system of expectations… Accountability refers to the perception of defending or justifying one's conduct to an audience that has reward or sanction authority, and where rewards or sanctions are perceived to be contingent upon audience evaluation of such conduct" (Beu and Buckley 2001; p. 61).

Briefly, accountability is the process of measurement, qualitative and quantitative, of social, ethical and environmental responsibility of the company. Such measurement is directed towards carrying out informative transparency as regards all stakeholders and towards improving company reputation.

After having analysed the concept of accountability, then some specific concepts of accountability, more relative to government and public administration entities, are considered.

Mutiganda and Jarvinen (2021) underline the growing interest by accountants in the area of political accountability (Fowler and Cordery 2015; Hyndman et al. 2008; Nyland and Pettersen 2015; Sinclair 1995) and particularly in those aspects concerning the restriction policies on public sector accountabilities (Bracci et al. 2015). The authors analyse a case using strong structuration theory (Stones 2005) applying it in the process of definiting accountability in situations of austerity policies. The case analysed regards Finland and, in particular, Viking City, from 2007 to 2015. The matter of analysis consists in the repercussions which came to light within the procedure of tendering the services for the management of the elderly. Such a procedure, over time, has seen change in both the behaviour of politicians and administrators on the basis of modifications to external structures and to the needs of maintaining consensus by the citizens. After having described the outcomes of the analysis of the case, also considering different legislatures, the authors may conclude that: "In our case,

the two competitive tendering processes illustrate that a high level of trust between agents is needed if changes in accountability are to occur (Coad and Glyptis 2014)" (Mutiganda and Jarvinen 2021, p. 99). The relationship between external and internal structures in the management of services, in this case services to the elderly, requires the construction of reciprocal trust, and on it the change of decision makers, both at public level and in the external structure (winner of the tender), intervenes over time. The authors start from 4 basic areas: external structure, internal structure, active agency and outcomes. However, the fundamental role of the interaction between structures and agents in all four areas under consideration exists. Therefore, it is not just a question of external pressures but also of how the leadership styles are able to manage the relationships. It is on these aspects that accountability is introduced which, over time and on the basis of the aspects defined, tends towards modifying itself: "we emphasise in our conclusion that political accountability is needed to make account use ethical (again, because not all the companies that won a contract with Viking City have started performing it, it remains too early to assume that political accountability will continue to manifest as positively as it currently does.)" (Mutiganda and Jarvinen 2021 p. 99).

Some authors (Andreaus et al. 2021) analysed accountability styles of the Italian government in the initial stages of the Pandemic - in exceptional times. Indeed, the authors underline that, notwithstanding the evolution of the studies on accountability, there is still room to be able to contribute further to the debate, especially in exceptional circumstances: "existing literature has shown how governments have mobilized political capital to alter the role of accountability in times of crisis (Demirag et al., 2020). This paper builds on this research by critically analysing the mechanisms through which the Italian government sought to combine public governance and public accountability issues as a means of urging shared responsibility. The notion of styles plays an important role in enhancing our understanding of how shared responsibility is promoted during various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic." (Andreaus et al., 2021: 448). In particular, the paper pauses on accountability styles by way of an analysis both of the documentation provided by the Italian government from 1st January to 7th August 2020 and also the press conferences which, in that period, were held by the Italian Prime Minister. The authors identify 5 phases: January 1–31; February 1–21; February 22–March 7; March 8–April 18; April 19–August 7. In each of these phases various styles of accountability are pinpointed, which are respectively: Rebuttal, Dismissal, Reactive, Proactive and Coactive (Andreaus et al. 2021, p. 455). Without going deep down to the particular meaning of each one, a passage from accountability mainly centred on government towards an accountability more co-participated, especially by citizens, can progressively be noted: "the accountability styles were focused on the government's responsibility, while in the last two phases, accountability focused on citizens' responsibility (Everett and Friesen 2010; Baker 2014) by creating a stronger sense of "shared responsibility" (Sciulli 2018)" (Andreaus et al. 2021, p. 462).

To better understand the meaning of "shared responsibility", the analysis of the third dimension is introduced and we avail of another interesting approach proposed by Shearer (2002). The author considers the development of a theory of accountability broader than that based upon classic economic theory. Indeed, the ethics aspect, and the relationship between it and accountability, seems to be rather underconsidered, as can be read: "Efforts to assign economic accountability in this way, however, often indadequately theorize necessary ethical pressupositions regarding the moral status of economic collectivities, including the scope of moral community to which the entity is accountable … the subject has received relatively little

attention, and remains underdeveloped relative to the social accounting literature to which it is requisite" (Shearer 2002, p. 542). To better understand how accountability can contribute to "emancipatory change" and democracy, Shearer (2002) suggests accounting for itself and accounting for the o(O)ther. Companies become members of a moral community through the virtues / merits of the accounts that these companies present to it. Therefore, accountability has a strong relevance to the relationships, since without a relationship there is no accountability and the ethical aspect is part of the relationship (Shearer 2002).

Therefore, the ethical substratum defines broader horizons of accounting / accountability reunifying the identities that relate with each others: "At the same time Schweiker (1993:241) argues that the fiduciary relationship of trust that exists between the accountant and the entity ... creates a doubleness of identity sufficiently analogous to that experienced by the individual to create a "fragile unity of an agent and community in time" (p. 244, in Shearer 2002, p. 546).

Differing interests interact in this way and: "...the account serves to create a "unity-in-diversity" that constitutes the temporal identity of the collective entity" (Shearer 2002, p. 547). As quoted previously, Schweiker (1993) underlines the importance of this relationality that exists within accountability.

From this it is clear that reporting is an activity that is expressed through one's identity in relation to the other and this has ethical implications through the relationality within accounting.

Other scholars consider accountability as an elusive concept for which it inserts the discourse of inter-subjectivity (Sinclair 1995).

Arrington and Fancis (1993) underline accounting as a response to the demonstration of reasonableness of the company's work and necessarily recall the presence of "others".

The aspects just outlined though, also highlight the difficulties in putting together interests that are often in contrast to each other. To this end, it is interesting to recall those that concern the definitions of accountability and the role played by the subjects with whom the company interacts. For this reason, another framework regarding the discipline of accounting may be considered: one that comes out of stakeholder perspectives within a pluralistic democracy (Brown et al. 2015). The work of Brown et al. (2015) and of the Special Issue (AAAJ 2015, vol 29, Issue 5: "Accounting in pluralistic societies") originates from the consideration that society is made up of various subjects who are often at loggerheads with each other and considering all the needs for guaranteeing the democratic process means being able to elaborate involvement processes that foresee a fundamental and creative role for accounting. Indeed, the authors affirm: "Often, incorporating the perspectives of diverse groups (e.g. their values, assumptions, knowledges and approaches to social change) requires different processes and accountability regimes, and new types of information transmitted through alternative media. However, the accounting, accountability and policy implications are generally not well articulated or understood." (Brown et al 2015, p. 627). Indeed, the contents of the Special Issue allow for reflecting upon the various aspects that regard engagement of the various stakeholders and also upon ways through which to guarantee greater justice and active participation, in order to promote a process that is democratic to a larger degree (Special Issue: Accounting in pluralistic societies, Guest Editors: Judy Brown, Jesse Dillard and Trevor Hopper, Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal: Volume 28, Issue 5 (2015)).

The synthesis which may come out of the various academic papers is: "Democratic accounting practices, like democratic practices more generally, can take various forms and engage many different actors over many different contexts. Those contesting dominant accounting logic

need to specify alternatives based on viewpoints such as stakeholder-accountability or critical perspectives" (Brown et al 2015, p. 640; Dillard and Brown 2015; Gray et al. 2014). Besides these aspects, at the basis of such considerations, the authors suggest the importance of the ethos and reciprocal respect in generating profound and sincere relations.

What has been affirmed brings the interest back to the third dimension which has been examined and involves the relationship between ethics and accountability. This in that, some research works demonstrated how the choice of ethics is important also for being more and more competitive[26] (Baldarelli 2005).

Such an aspect was analysed by Rusconi (2009). The idea of the author is that of establishing a dialogue between two different worlds, which have developed separately, and which are represented, on the one hand, by the corporate systemic theory and the theories of the stakeholders and, on the other, by the ethical vision of the company understood as a system. The author considers, therefore, ethics fundamental to the management of the company.

Rusconi (2019) defines the principles of the proposed model of Stakeholder Management Theory (SMT). Especially, stakeholder theory (Freeman 2010; Rusconi 2019) firstly considers the company to be a system of stakeholders, a "stellar" system of stakeholders (Baldarelli et al. 2005). Secondly, it considers each stakeholder positioned in its own map of specific stakeholders who make identify its borderlines difficult and its management difficult. Thirdly, the stakeholders try to seek a balance that includes the minimum aknowledgement of their needs (MMA - Minimum Mutual Acknowledgement). Fourthly, each stakeholder, besides the MMA which creates a condition of minimum, nevertheless has the aim of having his own needs satisfied.

These aspects bring the EFST (Ethical Firm System Theory) to help SMT in the sense that SMT presupposes a tight connection between ethics and success in business.

And the theory goes from an approach of corporate responsibility towards stakeholders to responsible stakeholders who, if they want to increase benefits, must somehow make it known to the company passing from competition among them, to cooperation and corporatism.

Finally, each company can be considered as a system of its own in which the stakeholders have the same dignity and different characteristics.

In this sense Tantalo and Priems (2014) also speak of synergy between stakeholders even if only the key ones, which in some way can help manage the trade-offs between competitive interests (Rusconi 2019). Moreover, the Author underlines the responsibility of the company towards the stakeholders and the accountability of the stakeholders towards the company and other stakeholders. The process moves towards empowerment of stakeholders that involves greater attention of the same towards each other and also brings company decisions to take their needs into account (Goodstein and Wicks 2007; Rusconi 2019).

After the analysis of accountability using accounting perspective, in the next section the relationships among the two approaches, politics and accounting, are presented.

4.Accountabililty in politics and in accounting: some notes concerning relationships and differences

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[26] Indeed, please read: "A better understanding of why individuals behave as they do when presented with ethical dilemmas will allow organizations to be pro-active in create an ethical environment, which is critical to success" (Beu and Buckley 2001, p. 69.)

In order to answer to the research question: "What are the main aspects in common and the different ones in the accountability considered in policy and in accounting discipline?, in this section the main differences are outlined, which are in the previous two concepts, in order to achieve the possible relationships established in accountability, in politics and accounting.

Firstly, the matter under examination in accounting makes reference to companies. So, accountability has the company as its object, which is defined as a system of elements oriented towards the reaching of a vector of economic and social objectives, and is compared with broader systems, amongst which: market, ecological political and social environment (Amaduzzi 1965, 1966; Galassi 1969; Matacena 2017). So, the object of accountability is not represented only by the Public Administration but also by the private "companies" both for profit ones and not-for-profit ones (Amaduzzi 1965, 1966).

The second and fundamental difference is that in accounting attention is directed towards methods of government and control based on tools measuring outcomes in quantitative and qualitative terms: financial and non-financial statements (Ballucchi and Furlotti 2019) paying attention to relational and decision-making processes activated by them. In this discipline, the "technique" of measuring corporate outcomes has been and is developed together with the theory which is implied by it (Baldarelli et al. 2017).

Obviously, from the measurement and communication processes all the reasonings relative to the mechanisms which are talked about in politics set off. Shortly, in accounting without measurement and communication, it is not possible to proceed to processes of government and control. The quantitative / qualitative outcomes of measurement relate to and can modify the process of government and control, in that on the basis of the degree of their achievement, the company shall have to intervene to change the strategies and policies adopted.

Attention is so centred on the measuring that often in the writings of accounting attention seems placed exclusively on mere "tecnica contabile" (*accounting technique*) (Marchi 1993) losing sight of its relational value (Catturi 1989). This is one of the factors, according to the writer of this paper, that has made interpreting and reading accounting outcomes very difficult for those who are not expert and professionally prepared for the purpose. Such aspects have weighed, and still do, upon understanding the importance of reading the outcomes in any activity, including public administration! Responsibilisation of individuals passes by way of measuring the outcomes, even quantitative ones, of their actions, without which evaluation of activities and actions undertaken cannot be carried out. This, according to the writer of this paper, is the main aspect which distinguishes accountability in politics from accountability in business.

In politics, the attention is predominantly addressesed towards processes of legitimisation and control, that is mechanisms that generate the consensus. Such mechanisms may forecast the measuremnt of project outcomes, yet the dialectic does not originate from them, how much they are part of a pre-existing process without necessarily changing it. Therefore, not necessarily are they based upon tools of quantitative / qualitative measurement, but upon the dynamics of dialogue / relationship between rulers and ruled (citizens). In this process, aspects of measurement which are considered instrumental to the dynamics of the relationship and not so much to that of the government of the activities are moved to the background.

Table 1 Initial summary of specificities in the two doctrines

Accountability in politics	Accountability in accounting

1) Subject of analysis is the Public Administration	1) Subject of analysis is the Company
2) Prevalent attention is granted to the processes of legitimisation and control, that is mechanisms that generate the consensus, therefore, not necessarily based upon tools for quantitative / qualitative measurement, rather upon the dynamics of dialogue / relationship between rulers and ruled (citizens).	2) Attention is focussed upon government / control methods based upon tools for the measurement of outcomes in quantitative and qualitative terms: financial as well as non-financial statements, paying attention to relational and decision-making processes activated by them.
3) Measurement occurs by way of tools and dynamics which are developed throughout the relationship	3) By way of quantitative and qualitative outcomes the process of dialogue is rebooted / develops within the company, and between it and its stakeholders

Within this dynamic interaction of the analysis of the two disciplines, we can make out a relational margin, which starts from the measurement tools to broaden into concentric circles to relational dynamics, that originate from them.

Therefore, attention must focus on the importance in being accountable having at the base accounting, and non, tools of measurement, on one hand, and on the other, in avoiding the excessively jargon-ridden, or excessively verbose, "deviations" which may lead to considering "just the tools" losing sight of the process why they were launched.

In this scenario, the stakeholders play a fundamental role and so does their responsibilisation in "asking" that such an aspect is valued as well in order to make the mechanisms of dialogue between delegated (politicians) and delegators (citizens) easier.

5. Conclusion

In this work, the meaning of accountability has been analysed while considering two disciplines, politics and accounting.

To provide an answer to the research question, in both the need for basing accountability on the construction of relationships which can build trust and democracy came to the fore. We have met in literature, a re-definition of the role of accountability towards a new way of dealing with stakeholders, in order to reconcile conflicts and to act as an essential mediator to ensure transparency and the re-dial of dialogue among opposing social partners.

The literature presents possible orientations that can lead to a partial solution of the current state of the art in which accountability oscillates between scarcity of information and transparency and excessive information and redundancy. The contribution of Shearer (2002) and other authors (Andreaus et al 2021; Rusconi 2018; 2019) tries to bring attention to the aspects of responsibility and relationality of accountability, which, in this way, is oriented towards the function of contributing to democracy and emancipation. The accountability role of quantitative "mediation" is very important to give populism lesser negative attributes, because it helps stakeholders and social partners to clarify the reasons of eventual conflicts among them (Bebbington et al 2021).

It is in this context that the aspects inherent to fraternity, which we previously mentioned, are relative to a deeper study of relationships and betterment of their "nature". Such a principle, to which literature (Baggio 2013) has brought back attention in that it was partially

"forgotten" compared to those of freedom and equality, as well advocated by the French Revolution.

Within corporate literature too, primigenial aspects emerge which disclose that way of action suggested by Baggio (2013) which takes the name of fraternity, and this may say something to resolve "how" to connect the various aspects of accountability and how to link them with the mission and governance (?). But this is for later research works.

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