

Remaking Responsibility

Environmental Harm, Care,
and Accountability

7–9 October 2026

Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies

»Futures of Sustainability«

Universität Hamburg

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Responsibility is often invoked in relation to the climate crisis to assign historical blame to high-emitting nations, indict extractive corporations, or moralize individual behavior. It has become an expansive and elastic lexicon for navigating the overwhelming reality of climate change (Hentschel, 2022). Yet, even as the climate crisis demands new forms of responsibility, it simultaneously unsettles the very terms through which responsibility has conventionally been understood.

Environmental harm typically stems not from discrete acts, but entangled socio-political processes with uneven effects across space and time. Consequently, responsibility becomes diffused, deferred, and unevenly assigned. Even actions framed as responsible, such as climate mitigation projects or green infrastructure, can create new irresponsibilities, displacing harm onto other regions, ecosystems, or future generations. These patterns allow irresponsibility to solidify into institutions and infrastructures, such as fossil fuel subsidies, carbon markets, and the externalization of ecological damage onto the Global South. Thus, responsibility not only responds to environmental harm but also helps produce and normalize it.

As environmental obligation is often recast as a matter of individualized ethical conduct, it is reduced to personal matters of concern and the climate crisis is reframed as a problem of responsibility rather than of extractivism, structural violence, and uneven development. Such responsibilizing logics appear to obscure the relational dynamics of environmental harm, facilitate the depoliticization of climate governance, and ultimately reproduce the conditions they purport to address by turning the current epoch of

unprecedented destruction into a biopolitical age of responsibilization (Hoppe, 2024).

At the same time, responsibility is not only moralised but also juridified. Legal frameworks attempt to stabilise responsibility through principles of causation, liability, and the differentiation of duties, while grappling with the diffuse, delayed, and trans-national nature of environmental harm. Concepts such as common but differentiated responsibilities, due diligence, and environmental liability highlight both the possibilities and limits of formal responsibility allocation.

In this conference, we aim to explore responsibility as a contested and generative concept, shaping how environmental harm is attributed and governed, while also opening possibilities for collective care and accountability.

We welcome contributions that ask:

- How do social actors and governments define, allocate, and enact responsibility in response to climate and environmental crises?
- More specifically, how do legal and governance frameworks define units of responsibility and identify responsible actors within complex, multi-level, and transnational processes of environmental harm production, and with what consequences (Eckert, 2018; Eckert & Knöpfel, 2020)? What limitations exist in current systems of responsibility allocation, and how are these constraints being challenged or reworked through legal mobilization from below?

- When and how does environmental responsibility become a shared commitment, and how are capacities, freedoms, and constraints to act (otherwise) distributed among different actors?
- What alternative ways of thinking about and practising responsibility are emerging (Brand et al. 2020; Muraca, 2020)?
- How do they create prefigurative politics and redistribute obligations and relations of care (Muraca, 2016) in environments marked by loss and the ongoing destruction of both human and non-human worlds?

We invite conceptual and empirical engagements between the intersection of responsibility and the socio-ecological crisis across the following themes:

- Law, Responsibility, and Accountability
- Temporal Responsibility
- Social Theory of Responsibility
- Politicization and Depoliticization of Responsibility
- Responsibility and Social Movements
- Environmental Responsibilization and Biopolitics
- Decolonizing Responsibility
- Responsibility and Indigenous Worlding
- More-than-human Responsibilities

Dates and Deadlines

The conference will take place from **7–9 October 2026**.

It is hosted and organized by the Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies »Futures of Sustainability« at the University of Hamburg.

Submission of abstracts (300 words) with a 100-word short bio by: **22 February 2026**
 Submission of conference papers: **September 2026**

Please send abstracts to: zukuenfte.der.nachhaltigkeit@uni-hamburg.de [subject: Responsibility Abstract]

Sources

Brand, U. et al., C. (2021). From planetary to societal boundaries: An argument for collectively defined self limitation. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 17(1), 265–292.

Eckert, J. (2018). The morals of liability: Some thoughts on “Humanitarians in court.” *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 50, 375–378.

Eckert, J., & Knöpfel, L. (2020). Legal responsibility in an entangled world. *Journal of Legal Anthropology*, 4, 1–16.

Hentschel, C. (2022). Stretches of imagination at the end of times: Affective workouts against apocalypse. *Artnodes*, 1–8.

The conference is primarily aimed at doctoral and early career researchers from a broad range of disciplines, including law, political ecology, geography, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, history, science and technology studies (STS), political science, economics, environmental humanities, and related fields. Interdisciplinary and cross-methodological approaches are particularly welcome. We highly encourage submissions that foreground perspectives and experiences from the Global South, Indigenous epistemologies, and decolonial or postcolonial approaches to responsibility. We welcome theoretical reflections, empirical case studies, historical analyses, ethnographies, community-engaged research, and practice-oriented contributions as well as submissions drawing on policy, activism, artistic practice, or civil society engagements with responsibility.

The conference will combine paper presentations with forums and conversations involving activists, as well as keynote lectures by distinguished scholars. To foster collective discussion, participants will be invited to share their written contributions in advance. The conference will also serve as a space for developing a collective publication.

We have limited funds to help cover travel and accommodation for participants who are unable to secure support from their home institution. Please let us know if you would like to be considered for funding.

Hoppe, K. (2024). Das „Prinzip Antworten“: Eine postapokalyptische Theorie der Verantwortung für das Anthropozän. *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 34, 249–273.

Muraca, B. (2016). Relational values: A Whiteheadian alternative for environmental philosophy and global environmental justice. *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*, 8(1), 19–38.

Muraca, B. (2020). Possibilities for degrowth: A radical alternative to the neoliberal restructuring of growth-societies. In K. Legun, J. C. Keller, M. Carolan, & M. M. Bell (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (pp. 478–496). Cambridge University Press.