



Making sense of governance

H.K. Colebatch

Public Health and Policy Studies, UNSW, Australia

Abstract

Governance is a term which is widely, but not always precisely, used, and this article seeks to clarify what the term is being used to mean. In particular, it is concerned with whether it denotes a particular mode of government, or whether is a broad category encompassing all modes of government. It focuses on the arguments about political practice on which the original claims about governance were based, and the evidence that there has been a change in political practice which demands a new label. It concludes with a discussion of the way that accounts of government are used in the practice of governing, and the incentives that this gives both participants and observers to adopt the warm but fuzzy term ‘governance’.

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What are we talking about?

There is no doubting the appeal of the term ‘governance’ in contemporary discussion of governing, but it can be asked if the widespread use of the term has been accompanied by fuzziness about its meaning. Does it, for instance, denote a particular way of governing, or does it cover all modes of governing – in which case, do we gain anything by using the term? This article seeks to open up discussion about governance as a concept, both for observers and for practitioners: about the meaning being given to it, about its relationship to practice, and about the extent to which it adds to our ability to make sense of the process of governing. It poses a counterfactual – an alternative theorisation of the same evidence – and explores the use of multiple accounts in the analysis and practice of governing, and the significance of this for the theorising of organisational form, and concludes with a review of governance as a construct. To facilitate this discussion, the argument is set out as a series of propositions.

1. Governance has been widely adopted as a concept, but without much clarity about its meaning (or perhaps because of this)

Fifteen years ago governance was relatively unknown as a concept, but now it gets more mentions on Google Scholar than ‘government’, ‘politics’ or ‘democracy’. (This not true of Google itself, suggesting that the term has much more appeal to academics than to the public at large.) For a term that has become so widely used, there has been remarkably little concern about its meaning. In Rhodes’ pioneering work *Understanding Governance* (1997), he identifies six different meanings given to the term, and suggests that it ‘really has no meaning’, but passes quickly and

E-mail address: hal@colebatch.com.

without explanation to a seventh, his own ‘stipulative definition’, without much concern to demonstrate why this is superior to the others. Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden (2004) identify nine different meanings, and Offe (2008, 2009) asks if the term is an ‘empty signifier’.

Rather than searching for ‘the meaning’ of such a variously used word, it is perhaps more fruitful to investigate the contexts in which ‘governance’ came to be used. But here we need first to take note of Offe’s distinction between using governance as a way of distinguishing one mode of governing from another (*Gegenbegriff*), or using it as a way of encompassing all modes of governing (*Oberbegriff*). As we shall see, the term began as a distinguishing marker (*Gegenbegriff*) but is now commonly used as a comprehensive *Oberbegriff*. The increasingly authoritative Wikipedia (quoting Weiss & Thakur, 2007) defines ‘global governance’ in such all-encompassing terms as

the complex of formal and informal institutions, mechanisms, relationships, and processes between and among states, markets, citizens and organisations, both inter- and non-governmental, through which collective interests on the global plane are articulated, rights and obligations are established, and differences are mediated.

Although it is possible to find scattered historical examples of the term being used with a range of meanings or no particular meaning (e.g. Wilson’s, 1976 memoir *The Governance of Britain*), the spectacular adoption of the term in the 1990s can perhaps be traced to two streams of discourse. One was among practitioners, marked by the World Bank’s (1989) diagnosis that the lack of development in Africa was due to a ‘crisis of governance’. It defined governance as

“... the exercise of political power to manage a nation’s affairs”. Good governance included some or all of the following features: an efficient public service; an independent judicial system and legal framework to enforce contracts; the accountable administration of public funds; an independent public auditor, responsible to a representative legislature; respect for the law and human rights at all levels of government; a pluralistic institutional structure, and a free press (Leftwich, 1993: 610).

Here, the bank was launching a political reform agenda, but as it is prohibited by its Articles of Agreement from involvement in political matters, it called this agenda ‘good governance’, and this usage became widespread among reformers. After all, who could be in favour of ‘bad governance’?

The other discourse about governance, by social scientists, came by a different route. The most significant voices were perhaps the international relations scholars who noted the construction of regimes of rule which did not rely on claims of the sovereignty of states, and wrote about ‘governing without government’ (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992). This was a significant departure from the Westphalian assumption that governing is accomplished by the exercise of the authority of states, and was criticised for its imprecision (see Smouts, 1998), but it was congruent with observations of examples of cross-national governing such as Antarctica, where there are no universally recognised claims to sovereignty, or the management of epidemic disease, where one consequence of the SARS epidemic was the strengthening of the power of the WHO to involve itself in health crises without invitation from the national government. The term was applied to the analysis of government by Rhodes, building on earlier work about linkage in local government in the UK. He argued that the UK was moving from ‘government’ to ‘governance’, a situation in which

The state becomes a collection of interorganizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate (1997: 57).

So government is rule by direction; governance is rule by self-organising networks. Here, governance is clearly a distinguishing term (*Gegenbegriff*), used to clarify a claimed historical transition.

The new term attracted a good deal of attention, and became widely used by both scholars and practitioners (see, e.g. Jose, 2007). It had strong appeal in Western Europe, and had a particular attraction in the EU, where the quest to establish a single European market led to the very evident reconstruction of the regimes of rule in wide areas of social and economic life. The ‘rules of the game’ which had developed in different countries in various spheres of social and economic life were excavated, challenged, and superseded by new European rules. This was accomplished by an extended process of negotiation which was marked by complexity of identities and interests, information asymmetry, and limited scope for resolving contests by authoritative decision: it was a very public mode of regime-making, and seemed to exemplify the claim that rule by governments was being replaced by negotiation within networks, bringing the social science and

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