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Publisher: Routledge

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## Canadian Foreign Policy Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcfp20>

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David A. Welch<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada

Published online: 20 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: David A. Welch (2013) What is “governance” , anyway?, Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, 19:3, 253-267, DOI: [10.1080/11926422.2013.845584](https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2013.845584)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2013.845584>

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## Commentaries

### What is “governance”, anyway?

David A. Welch\*

*Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada*

The word “governance” has been in the English language for more than 600 years but has only recently become sexy (see [Figure 1](#)). Type it into Google on any given day and you will get more than 100 million hits – at least five times as many as “motherhood.” “Governance” is in the titles of think tanks, government departments, periodicals, university departments, academic programs, courses, professorial chairs and (at last check) the titles of 9955 items in the Library of Congress catalogue. I teach in two graduate “global governance” programs and offer a course titled, simply, “Security Governance,” the aim of which is to elaborate and evaluate the governance of various security issues. One would imagine that with so many people using the word it would have a clear meaning. One would be wrong.

Whenever I encounter a word whose meaning is unclear, I turn first to the dictionary. Here we find that the word can be used to denote at least seven different kinds of things:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) An activity
  - a. Controlling, directing or regulating influence\*†
  - b. The act of governing\*†§
- (2) A function
  - a. The function of governing\*
- (3) A procedure
  - a. The method or process of governing\*†§
- (4) A circumstance
  - a. The fact that (a person, etc.) governs\*
  - b. Control, sway, mastery
  - c. Good order\*
  - d. The state of being governed\*†‡
  - e. Government, control§
- (5) Authority
  - a. The office of governing\*
  - b. Permission to govern\*
  - c. Command (of a body of men, a ship)\*
  - d. Authority to govern\*§

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\*David A. Welch is CIGI Chair of Global Security at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, Professor of Political Science at the University of Waterloo, and Senior Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. He has written on International Relations theory, international security, foreign policy decision making, and ethics and international affairs. He is currently working on a book on security theory and various projects related to Asia-Pacific security. Email: [dawelch@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dawelch@uwaterloo.ca)

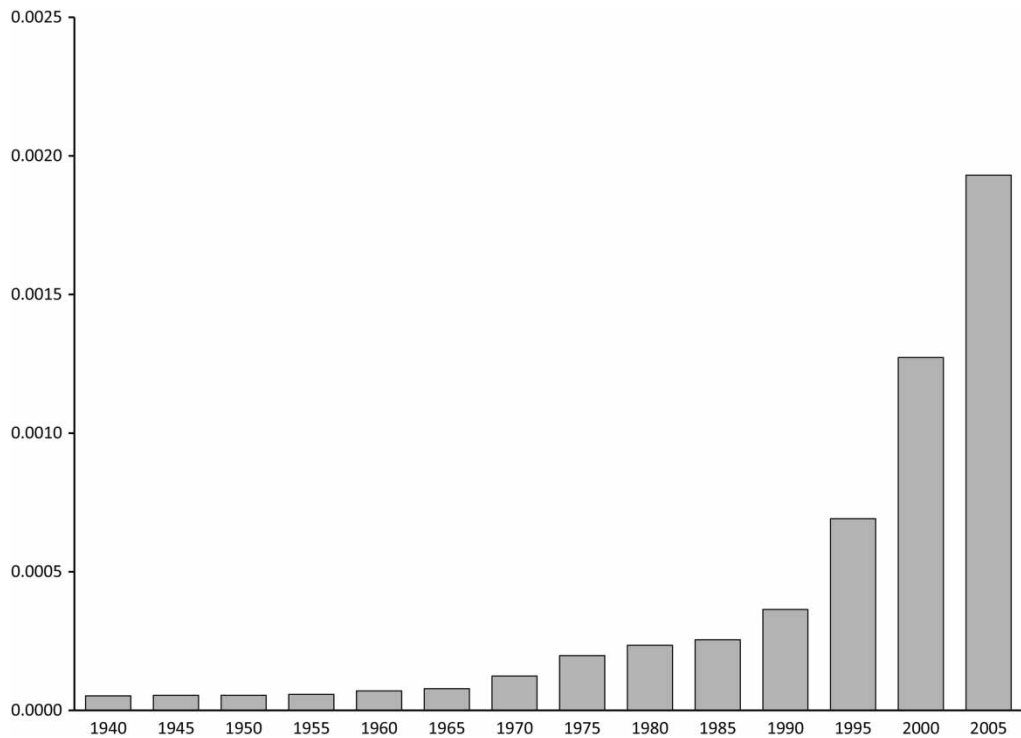


Figure 1. Google Ngram results for “Governance” (percent)

- (6) A power
  - a. The power of governing\*†‡
- (7) A system
  - a. The manner in which something is governed or regulated; method of management, system of regulations\*
  - b. A system of governing†
- (8) A style or disposition
  - a. Conduct of life or business; mode of living, demeanour\*
  - b. Discreet or virtuous behaviour; wise self-command\*
  - c. The manner of governing; conduct of office\*†
  - d. Personal conduct, behaviour, or manner of life†

It will be apparent immediately that this cacophony is unsatisfactory. If phrases such as “processes of governance,” “systems of governance” or “styles of governance” are to have any meaning – and surely they must – then we cannot, without risk of circularity, define the word in terms of processes, systems or styles. But this does not narrow things down much.

Arguably, the root problem here is the English language, which is itself a messy accretion that eventually sanctions neologisms and evolutions in meaning. No living architect would take “artificial” as a compliment today, but Christopher Wren did when King Charles II used it in 1675 to describe St. Paul’s Cathedral (my teenage son would approvingly think that “sick”). For that matter, in what other language but English would you find a word such as “sanction,” which can mean both punish and permit? But good architects design buildings that will stand no matter what lies below, so it behooves us as scholars, analysts and advocates to prepare the

groundwork before we begin, and that means taking the time and trouble to clarify – and, if necessary, to stipulate – terms. Scholars of global governance, at least, have not had much success; as Thomas Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson have recently argued (forthcoming 2014), the term “remains notoriously slippery.”

Some have embraced the ambiguity (e.g., Rosenau 1995). The temptation is understandable insofar as governance however we define it is, in fact, empirically messy and evolves over time. It would seem somehow disrespectful of the phenomenon to try to put it in a conceptual straight-jacket. On this view, governance is very much like the English language itself – rich and full of meaning despite being messy or slippery.<sup>2</sup> But the difficulty with this attitude is that one can never be sure whether two people who use the word are talking about the same thing – and if you cannot be sure that two people are talking about the same thing, you cannot know whether they are having a productive debate about how to improve it. What would make for a better apple might well make for a much worse orange.

Despite these difficulties, it is clear that all understandings of governance have at least a family resemblance. Governance is about handling things. It involves trying to bring order to something that is in need of order. For this reason, as Lawrence Finkelstein correctly insists, “governance is an activity – that is, doing something” (Finkelstein 1995). But is it anything else? What is it not?

In my Security Governance course, students are required to research, present, assess and make specific recommendations for improving the governance of a particular issue on the international agenda (this year’s choices included piracy, substate conflict, terrorism, migration and the privatization of security; in years past, students examined topics such as interstate war, nuclear proliferation, climate change, disease, cultural security, landmines, and small arms and light weapons). Accomplishing this task requires a clear definition of “governance,” and this year we decided to roll one of our own to use throughout the term and in the students’ various assignments. My role was primarily to facilitate the crowdsourcing. The process was both fascinating and instructive, and in my view highly successful.

The first problem was to decide where to begin. The students opted to start with one of the definitions offered in the readings on the syllabus and make suitable adjustments. Many authors on the reading list took the meaning of “governance” for granted and never bothered to define it (though through their usage they made it clear that, in most cases, they understood the term idiosyncratically). A few offered wholly unsuitable definitions – or, perhaps I should say, quasi-characterizations.<sup>3</sup> But there were some promising candidates, and the group opted to begin with the one that seemed to be the best of the available lot:

For the purposes of this article, as applied to European security, governance involves the coordinated management and regulation of issues by multiple and separate authorities, the interventions of both public and private actors (depending upon the issue), formal and informal arrangements, in turn structured by discourse and norms, and purposefully directed toward particular policy outcomes (Webber *et al.* 2004, p. 4).

Now, technically this passage does not *define* governance; it merely tells us what governance *involves*. But the class decided that this was close enough for governance work. We chose to ignore also the provisos “for the purpose of this article” and “as applied to European security,” on the ground that a useful definition of governance ought to travel. As a field, we are in trouble if we have to come up with a unique definition of governance for every task or region.

With the provisos out of the way, the next step was to see how we could improve upon the formulation.

We liked the word “management,” because governance is certainly about handling problems, and management implies doing so over time. We agreed that governance is not something you do

once quickly, but something that takes time and that probably requires some learning and some refinement (hence the understandable if wrongheaded temptation to define governance as a “process”). Ideally, a problem gets “solved,” in which case presumably one could strike the proverbial governance tent; but in the real world of politics, governance is something for which there is usually a steady or increasing demand.

What about “and regulation”? We decided this ought not to be built into the definition of governance itself, even though very clearly governance usually involves a great deal of regulation. Promulgating, monitoring compliance with and attempting to enforce rules is a common and often highly desirable way of managing problems; but there are many different kinds of rules – primary rules, secondary rules (Hart 1961, Raymond 2011), treaties, standards, administrative requirements, positive laws, customary laws, positive injunctions and negative injunctions. In theory, issues can also be “managed” without rules (for example, through norms, understood as socially expected modes of behavior, and perhaps also in some cases quite simply by providing enough information to solve coordination problems). So the word “regulation” is not obviously always appropriate. It would be too broad to convey specific content even if it were appropriate, and in any case regulation is a means of management, such that “management and regulation” is either redundant or overly constraining.

We had no issues with “of issues;” these are what one manages through governance. But what about “by multiple and separate authorities”? We agreed that “multiple” was probably fine in principle, since if there were only one authority, we would use the word “government” instead (Finkelstein 1995). But “separate” can be a matter of degree. Sometimes authorities are entirely separate, as in the case of sovereign states. Sometimes authorities overlap, check and balance, or, as in the case of feudal, medieval or tributary systems, co-exist in complex patterns that can be fluid or ambiguous. We decided that “polycentric” was an efficient, variety-tolerant characterization.

Governance can, of course, involve “the interventions of both public and private actors (depending upon the issue).” But the inclusion of this phrase in a potential definition sparked an extended discussion of the desirability of specifying the kinds of actors involved in the activity. We agreed that in global governance, states are almost always key actors, and in some cases they are the sole actors (for example, in determining which political units count as sovereign states). International organizations (IOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations and various other civil society or nonstate actors are frequently involved in global governance, however, and in some cases states are not involved in governance at all (for example, in efforts to codify corporate social responsibility). So neither public nor private actors are necessary for global governance, though either can be sufficient. The same can be said of governance arrangements at any geographic scale (regional, local, etc.). The class decided to omit any reference to “who” does governance in the definition itself, on the ground that there is no justification for circumscribing this by fiat.

Next on the list for consideration was “formal and informal arrangements.” The question immediately arose as to what this distinction signified. It turned out to be very difficult to identify the relevant desideratum. One possibility was that what is written down is formal. Another was that what is solemnified ritualistically in some way is formal. A third was that what is done in a rule-based way, or in accordance with strong social norms of etiquette, counts as formal. We had difficulty imagining why any of these should be important when the point of governance is simply to get things done, and however one makes the distinction either formal or informal arrangements can succeed or fail. Moreover, no matter how one distinguishes formal from informal, (1) real-world governance arrangements almost always involve elements of both, and (2) in principle they could involve only one or only the other – in which case “and/or” would be better than “and,” but both are ultimately pointless. No matter how you slice it, the qualifier adds no value.

Next came “in turn structured by discourse and norms.” We were puzzled by “in turn,” since the concept of turn-taking came out of left field and did not seem appropriate no matter how we tried to

make sense of it. “Structured by discourse and norms” struck many in the class as one of those clove-cigarette-and-absinthe expressions of which European scholars are so fond, which immediately set off alarm bells among the linear North American thinkers in the crowd. We had already discussed the role of norms in governance and had decided that they were nearly ubiquitous at both the primary and secondary levels (i.e., at the level of substantive norms and at the level of norms-about-norms, or metanorms). Without discourse, of course, governance is impossible, because one has to talk about things to manage them. But what does “structured by discourse and norms” mean? The best we could do to make sense of this phrase was to imagine that whoever urged its inclusion in the definition of governance simply meant to say that potential forms of governance are limited by people’s capacities to articulate them and by the permissiveness of background social context – all fair enough, but, we ultimately decided, an insight that goes without saying, since what is impossible is by definition not interesting empirically.

What about “purposefully directed toward particular policy outcomes”? We had trouble imagining why one would invest time, energy and resources in governance without a purpose. And seeking to manage a problem at a minimum involves some vision of an acceptable outcome (i.e., a state of affairs in which the problem at hand is at least less problematic). But what about “policy”? Is governance about policy? Generally not. Governments do policy; actors involved in governance do order. With “policy” out the door, “particular” seemed moot, but several in the class thought that it was worth noting that there was no way to get an effort at governance off the ground if the relevant parties involved in the effort radically disagreed on the question of what would count as success. So “particular” got to stay.

With the threshing complete, we were left with the following preferred definition: Governance is “the coordinated, polycentric management of issues purposefully directed towards particular outcomes.”

Like good engineers, we then spent some time stress-testing our definition. We sought to find gaps, holes or weaknesses of various kinds, in particular by trying to decide whether our definition forced us to characterize as “governance” cases that we and others would almost certainly want to omit or vice versa. We failed. Our definition seemed to stand up to anything we could throw at it. We then had a general discussion of whether the definition imposed unacceptable limits on analysis that would frustrate the goal of finding ways of improving governance wherever one found it. Again, we were pleasantly surprised by its apparent fungibility. We realized that the reason for this was that the definition itself placed minimal limits on the following questions:

- Who does governance?
- What do they do when they do it?
- When do they do it?
- Where do they do it?
- Why do they do it?

In real-world cases, one or more of these questions will inevitably arise. For example, in answer to the “where” question, one can readily apply adjectives such as “global,” “regional,” “national” or “local” to limit scope conditions. Similarly, one can use modifiers such as “interwar,” “Cold War,” or “twenty-first century” to circumscribe analysis temporally. As far as we could tell, our crowd-sourced definition would have performed at least as well as – and arguably better than – the definition with which we began in the very article in which it appeared. Moreover, our spare, efficient generic conceptualization made it easy to compare, contrast and assess the nature, difficulty and current success of governance efforts in what are sometimes radically different issue areas.

So there you have it: Governance is the coordinated, polycentric management of issues purposefully directed towards particular outcomes. No more, no less. My students say so.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the MA students in my Winter 2012 Security Governance course at the University of Waterloo, without whom this paper would not have been possible – Christopher Bordeleau, Alison Bottomley, Jeffrey Chalifoux, Evan Cinq-Mars, Aladdin Diakun, Marjorie Hagnier, Kyle Harris, Hari KC, Filip Kedzior, Daniel Koscinski, Matthew Redding, Karina Sangha, Gabriel Williams and Jahan Zeb – and also to the participants in the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) Global Security Workshop, “Measuring Governance Effectiveness: National And International Dimensions,” Waterloo, Ontario, 19 June 2013.

## Notes

1. Most definitions paraphrased and parsed by category: \* = Oxford English Dictionary; † = Webster’s Third International; ‡ = American Heritage; § = Collins.
2. Earlier I invoked the authority of dictionaries only to rebel against them in part – so the thought that we might speak of the governance (so understood) of the English language itself is certainly sick. On self-reference, see Hofstadter (1979).
3. For example: “In terms of definition, security governance has been related to the emergence [of] ‘structures and processes which enable a set of public and private actors to coordinate their interdependent needs and interests through the making and implementation of binding policy decisions in the absence of a central political authority’” (E. Krahmann 2003, quoted in Krahmann 2005).

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## Plumbing the ideational depths of governance

Patricia M. Goff\*

*Department of Political Science, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Canada*

David Welch and his students offer a thought-provoking definition of governance at a time when, as he points out, the term is in common usage, but there is no consensus on its meaning. Their definition is pithy and quotable and it covers a lot of ground. It acknowledges the increasing

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\*Patricia Goff is Associate Professor of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University and Director of the PhD in Global Governance Program at the Balsillie School of International Affairs. She specializes in International Political Economy and International Relations Theory. She is co-editor with Kevin C. Dunn of *Identity and Global Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan Press) and co-editor with Paul Heinbecker of *Irrelevant or Indispensable: the United Nations in the 21st Century* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press). She is also author of *Limits to Liberalization: Local Culture in a Global Marketplace* (Cornell University Press). Email: [pgoff@wlu.ca](mailto:pgoff@wlu.ca)



complexity of governance challenges. It does not foreclose the expanding range of actors active in governance. However, in other ways it leaves one unsatisfied.

In my view, the main shortcoming of the definition springs from the fact that Welch and his students assume an interesting opposition between North Americans and Europeans, which allows them to dismiss their Continental brethren a little too hastily. Out with the apparently European bathwater goes the “norms and discourse” baby.

Welch notes that the Webber, Croft and Howarth definition, which provides their jumping-off point, uses a curious turn of phrase: governance is . . . “in turn structured by norms and discourse.” Welch and his students have two responses to this. First, they get caught up in the implied sequencing of the influence of norms and discourse. I am not sure that Webber *et al.* intended their definition to suggest that norms and discourse operate after some things and before others. If they did, I would be similarly perplexed. Nonetheless, Welch and his students then go on to downplay the role of norms and discourse for some interesting reasons. On the one hand, they claim that the very concepts seem unpalatable to the linear North American mind. On the other hand, Welch and his students contend that the suggestion that governance is structured by norms and discourse is obvious. They concede that norms are “nearly ubiquitous.”

They ultimately conclude the following:

But what does “structured by discourse and norms” mean? The best we could do to make sense of this phrase was to imagine that whoever urged its inclusion in the definition of governance simply meant to say that potential forms of governance are limited by people’s capacities to articulate them and by the permissiveness of background social context – all fair enough, but, we ultimately decided, an insight that goes without saying, since what is impossible is by definition not interesting empirically.

This statement has potentially radical implications for our understanding of governance, especially the last clause. It’s worth noting that the nature of the pedagogical exercise will have had an impact on how Welch and his students considered the influence of norms and discourse – and identity and practices, for that matter. They hew closely to the language of the definition that they critique, rather than starting with a more obvious and direct question such as, “How might attention to norms, discourse, identity and practices help us to understand governance?” As a result, a certain type of head-scratching ensues.

Nonetheless, I take Welch to be saying that he and his students know that norms and discourses create parameters for action. What we say matters. The concepts that we think with matter. Indeed, dominant discourses and norms, as well as prevailing understandings of who we are and of how we do things, inform and even determine the scope for action. They take this to be true. Many of us, however, are not content to stop with this mere assertion. This assertion is a gateway to something that is extremely interesting not only empirically, but theoretically and politically.

One compelling reason for analyzing what is seemingly impossible now is that it might not be impossible later. Surely this simple insight has given hope to people throughout the ages – to women, for example, for whom the prospect of working outside the home was unthinkable in previous generations. Laws or the threat of force did not preclude this outcome; women’s experiences were “structured by norms and discourse” about family roles (e.g., Berggren 2003, Boudet *et al.* 2012).

Scholars of human rights have examined the emergence of norms of self-determination and human rights after the Second World War (e.g., Burgers 1992, Donnelly 1998). Their work suggests that a full understanding of responses to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, for instance, or to genocide in Rwanda is incomplete without reference to what human rights norms and discourse demanded, enabled and/or legitimated with respect to state action.

Norms, dominant discourses, prevailing identities and accepted everyday practices have informed governance in the European Union since its inception (e.g., Goff 2007, Loriaux



2008). Navigating the recent European financial crisis was partly about attending to debilitating levels of debt and partly about the degree to which Germans might view their Greek cousins as part of the European Union “we” and not the Southern European “they.”

Examples like this abound. In flagging them, I do not mean to imply that there is a settled view on norms, discourse, identity and practices that Welch and his crew simply omit. Rather, there are multiple lively debates going on in global politics about these ideas. Their inclusion in the ongoing conversation about governance could deepen our understanding in at least two ways.

First, attention to norms and discourse will likely take us in a much less technocratic direction. Welch maintains that “issues are what one manages through governance” and that “the point of governance is simply to get things done.” He says, too, that governance is about “bringing order to something that is in need of order.” These statements are shot through with a bureaucratic vision – dare I say, they invoke a certain discourse – that encourages some questions and discourages others. But the questions that they discourage are vital to our understanding. Why are certain phenomena designated as issues to be managed in the first place? How do they come to be understood in certain terms and not others? Why do some solutions come to be favored while others are rejected, even considered unthinkable? These sorts of questions, which focus on how we talk about things, the meanings that we attach to them, and the narratives, habits of speech and everyday routines on which we rely reveal, among other things, the play of power in governance. Inquiring into *which* discourses, norms and practices prevail in a given situation – as well as *why* and *how* this comes about – deepens our understanding of governance in crucial ways.

Second, attention to norms and discourse might encourage a less actor-centric analysis than Welch’s definition seems to invite. The influence of norms, discourse, identity and practices can be subtle, diffuse and indirect. Welch poses a series of questions at the end of his piece that are revealing. “Who does governance? What do they do when they do it? When do they do it? Where do they do it? Why do they do it?” If we take norms and discourse and their ideational cousins seriously, one is compelled to ask, “who is ‘they’?” Welch’s questions suggest that we can identify who is governing, and their intentions and motives will always be knowable. But governance effects occur in the absence of a visible or clearly identifiable actor. The emphasis shifts away from actors to the governance that occurs through systems of knowledge and social relations (Barnett and Duvall 2005).

Welch and his students take us a fair distance toward grasping the concept of governance. But they stop short of giving serious consideration to norms and discourse, associating them with “those clove-cigarette-and-absinthe expressions of which European scholars are so fond.” At this juncture, a little sip of absinthe would be refreshing.

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## What is governance without politics? Chiselling away at a definition

Mark Raymond\*

*Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada, Centre for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo, Canada*

David Welch and his Master of Arts (MA) students perform a valuable service in proposing a clear definition of governance, which they ultimately define as “the coordinated, polycentric management of issues purposefully directed toward particular outcomes.” The approach taken in arriving at the definition is not unlike Michelangelo’s description of the process of sculpting: stripping away the excess material to reveal the statue within the marble. The question, however, is whether part of the sculpture has been left on the studio floor. Unfortunately, I think it has.

The core activity in governance, according to the definition, is the “*management* of issues” (my emphasis), but what management entails is not fully specified. Welch explains that the word was kept from the original block of marble (i.e., the Webber, Croft and Howorth definition) “because governance is certainly about handling problems, and management implies doing so over time.” The consideration of time is commendable, and correct; however, there has been a slip of the chisel that has inadvertently taken something important with it.

The sculptors slide from talking about managing issues to talking about “handling problems,” but the scope of that phrase is unclear. Neither management nor handling problems are directly defined; however, some degree of meaning can be recovered from Welch’s account of the class’s deliberations. They chisel away the words “and regulation” (adjacent to the word “management” in the original definition) on the grounds that “in theory, issues can also be ‘managed’ without rules . . . so the word ‘regulation’ is not obviously always appropriate” and that “in any case regulation is a means of management.” Clearly, then, the sculptors believe there are multiple ways of “handling” or managing issues and that the menu of available options includes (but is not limited to) regulation, which Welch defines as “promulgating, monitoring compliance with, and attempting to enforce rules.”

The definition of regulation is illustrative of what has been left on the studio floor in the effort to define governance. Promulgation, monitoring and enforcement all presuppose not only the existence of rules to solve a known problem – since what is unknown or undecided cannot be promulgated – but also the identity of the parties competent to make and implement those rules, and the procedures by which they make them. Since Welch reports that his class believes regulation is a way of managing issues, and that managing issues is the crucial activity that comprises governance, this suggests that they imagine governance either takes place *after* or can be analytically *separated from* processes of deciding collaboratively on (1) what the “problem” is, (2) the outcome being pursued as a solution, (3) by whom it will be pursued and (4) how it will be pursued.

What unites these four questions is their connection to determining what constitutes the “good life” for a particular group, and to deciding who gets what. These are the fundamental

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\*Mark Raymond is a Research Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation and holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Toronto. He has taught international relations courses at the University of Toronto and the University of Waterloo. His research interests include international relations theory, international law and organization, international security and international history, including the history of global governance. He is currently also conducting research on Internet governance. Email: [mraymond@balsillieschool.ca](mailto:mraymond@balsillieschool.ca)

questions of politics. A complete definition of politics is beyond the scope of this brief reply; however, for my purposes here I will treat it as including the contestation of fundamental values and allocations of resources, rights and duties.

The view that governance takes place after such questions have been conclusively decided (that it is post-politics) is akin to Francis Fukayama's (1992) argument that the Western liberal democratic model amounts to the "end of history." Such an argument is unsatisfying, among other reasons, because governance surely existed long before modernity<sup>1</sup> and because modernity has not led to convergence on basic values even within the West, let alone on a global scale. Indeed, security governance is an excellent example of an issue where governance proceeds apace while political questions have yet to be resolved. To name only two examples, the status of the "responsibility to protect" is still being contested, and the process of creating rules and norms for cyber security is just beginning. Nevertheless, it is possible to refer sensibly to the existence of security governance. So governance must entail more than simply the technical, apolitical "management" of issues, and the relationship between politics and governance cannot be sequential in nature.

The view that governance can be analytically separated from political questions might be more reasonable. Definitions should, after all, aim to be as spare as possible while still fit for purpose. But what happens if governance and politics are conceived as analytically distinct synchronic phenomena?

One answer would be to claim that coalitions of NGOs are doing "politics" while governments are doing "governance" behind security fences at summits. Yet we know that NGOs and other civil society actors can set agendas, frame problems, advocate particular solutions, impose costs and confer benefits on governments and international organizations, and act as invaluable partners in implementing governance solutions.<sup>2</sup> All of these things feel like governance for good reason: they are. Yet some of them are also clearly outside the narrower notion of managing an issue, since they deal with problem construction and the selection of a solution. Similarly, states clearly take positions on, and engage in conflict over, the kinds of basic value questions seemingly excluded from the definition of governance Welch and his students put forward. So the relationship between governance and politics is not a matter of actor type.

Another answer would be to claim that governance and politics are different roles often performed simultaneously by actors. But this raises the question of how conduct can be attributed to each role, especially since the lines between the activities often blur in practice. For example, in applying general rule X to particular case Y (that is, handling a problem), an actor is also asserting that: (1) situation Y is a problem, (2) that it is solved or at least ameliorated by the solution entailed by rule X, and (3) that it is legitimate for the actor in question to make that determination and apply the rule. This is what constructivists mean when they point out that applying a rule is tantamount to socially reproducing it (see, e.g., Onuf 1989).

I would suggest, instead, that it is artificial (and not in the good sense, with apologies to Christopher Wren) to separate politics from governance, and that the preferable solution is to amend the definition accordingly. Unfortunately, this is slightly more complex than simply picking up the cast-off marble from the studio floor and fixing it in place. Nevertheless, I will be foolhardy enough to attempt a replacement definition that I think addresses my concerns. A potential replacement definition might read as follows: governance entails the collective identification of problems, the selection and implementation of responses, and ongoing efforts both to alter and reproduce initial outcomes. The larger point illustrated by this exchange, in my view, is the degree to which international politics as a field of academic inquiry has neglected to think clearly about politics and the political. Rectifying this oversight will take effort, but also offers the potential to enrich a variety of conceptual discussions – including efforts to define and conceptualize governance.

## Notes

1. On non-Westphalian analogues to international politics, see Bozeman (1994), Cohen (1996), Lebow (2008), Watson (1992).
2. The literature on NGOs and civil society actors is extensive. See, among many others, Keck and Sikkink (1998).

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## What is “global governance,” anyway, and why do we care?

Thomas G. Weiss\*

*The City University of New York Graduate Centre, The Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, New York, United States of America*

David Welch and his MA class have made us uncomfortable with our customary waffling about definitions. Welch pins much of the blame on the English language, but former students of Latin (there are a few of us left) will appreciate that the root *gubernare* is the same for all the units studied by political scientists. “Governance” is closely associated with “governing” and “government” – that is, with political authority, institutions and effective control.

While Welch and students judge “pointless” the qualifier, for me the key insight from “governance” comes from the qualifying adjectives of “formal *and* informal,” which I apply to my definition of the ideas, values, rules, norms, procedures, practices, policies and organizations that provide better order than if we relied purely upon formal regulations and structures. Community attitudes or clubs, for instance, often cause or solve problems. The connotations in Latin

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\*Thomas G. Weiss is Presidential Professor of Political Science at The CUNY Graduate Center and Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies. He is also research professor at SOAS, University of London, past president of the International Studies Association (2009-10), Chair of the Academic Council on the UN System (2006-9), and editor of *Global Governance* (2000-5). He has written extensively about multilateral approaches to international peace and security, humanitarian action, and sustainable development. His latest authored volumes are: *The United Nations and Changing World Politics* (2014); *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (2013); *Humanitarian Business* (2013); *What’s Wrong with the United Nations and How to Fix It* (2012); *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action* (2012); *Thinking about Global Governance: People and Ideas Matter* (2011); *Humanitarianism Contested: Where Angels Fear to Tread* (2011); *Global Governance and the UN: An Unfinished Journey* (2010); and *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (2009). Email: [tweiss@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:tweiss@gc.cuny.edu)

(and its Greek etymological predecessor, *kubernân*) are helpful here. At whatever level, governance refers to the composite system through which an entity “pilots” or “steers” – or, in a contemporary translation, “manages” – its common affairs.

I am comfortable with the class’s definition – “the coordinated, polycentric management of issues purposefully directed towards particular outcomes” – except for one problem that arises from seeking to have minimal limits. That strategy works for answering: “Who does governance? What do they do when they do it? When do they do it? Why do they do it?” However, it has a shortcoming for answering “Where do they do it?” if the “where” is “global,” because governance may or may not involve authoritative governmental structures, decisions and enforcement.

Bear with me a moment to recall that global governance’s lineage includes early twentieth-century writings about international cooperation by John Maynard Keynes and H.G. Wells, which such Realists as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau took to task for being dangerously unrealistic. Global governance replaced an immediate predecessor, “world-order studies,” which many saw as top-down and static – having grown from world peace through world law (Clark and Sohn 1973) but prior to the advent of the analytical turn toward international regimes (Krasner 1983) – as well as insufficiently sensitive to the variety of actors, networks and relationships that increasingly characterized contemporary international relations.

When these perspectives looked a trifle old-fashioned, the new concept arose. International relations theorists James Rosenau and Ernst Czempel published their theoretical *Governance without government* (1992) the same year that Sweden launched the policy-oriented Commission on Global Governance under the chairmanship of former prime minister Ingmar Carlsson and Commonwealth secretary-general Sonny Ramphal. The publication of its report, *Our global neighbourhood* (Commission on Global Governance 1995), coincided with the first issue of *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organization*. This new quarterly sought to rediscover the global problem-solving origins of the leading journal in the field, which had lost its way. In the late 1940s, the World Peace Foundation started and sustained *International Organization*, which by the 1960s had ceased to examine international policy and organizational behavior; instead it focused on heavy-duty academic theorizing. Rather than a publication on the desks of practitioners, it became esoteric scholarly fare.

The need for the new journal appeared not only because international organizations are important in and of themselves but because applying “governance” to the globe can be truly misleading in one essential way: interdependence and institutions exist but in the *absence* of any overarching political authority, as any card-carrying Realist rapidly points out. The world has international organizations that have little power and exert little control. They often have routine and highly elaborate procedures but are not supranational (i.e., above country governments).

Quite a distinction thus exists between the national and international species of governance. In the former, governance consists of the informal networks of coordination *plus* the authoritative and coercive capacity of governments which – whatever their shortcomings – normally and predictably exert effective authority and control in Swaziland or Switzerland, in Uganda or the United States.

At the international level, however, we have governance *minus* government, with too few truly collective decisions and too little capacity to ensure compliance with them. The results may sometimes be satisfactory but not because of any top-down authority. Governing the world amounts to what Columbia University’s natural resources specialist Scott Barrett labels “organized volunteerism” (Barrett 2007). A rhetorical (for me at least) question jumps to mind which also helps explain why I care about the definition: will global voluntary action suffice? Organizations routinely help ensure postal delivery and airline safety, to be sure, but far too rarely address such grave problems as acid rain and ethnic cleansing. Can the world be successfully governed without institutions having some supranational characteristics, without at least more robust versions of current-generation intergovernmental organizations (IGOs)?

Global governance can perhaps best be seen as the attempt to provide government-like services and global public goods in the absence of a world government. It embraces an enormous variety of cooperative problem-solving arrangements that may be visible but informal (e.g., practices or guidelines governing private military companies or NGO participation in intergovernmental conferences) or result from temporary units (e.g., coalitions of the willing in Iraq or ad hoc corporate study groups). Such arrangements may also be more formal, taking the shape of hard rules (e.g., treaties governing the laws of war or trade practices) as well as constituted organizations with administrative structures and well-established practices to manage collective affairs by actors at all levels – including governments, IGOs, NGOs, private sector companies, and other civil society actors. This wide variety of such mechanisms and arrangements means that sometimes collective interests are articulated, rights and obligations established, and differences mediated; but more often they are not.

One last thought. We usually equate global governance with activities that are hard to dislike – in particular, cooperation across borders or partnerships among conflicting interests. But Adolf Hitler's Third Reich collaborated with Josef Stalin's Soviet Union in 1939 to invade Poland; belligerents from rival ethnic groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo sometimes cooperate to rape and plunder; and the National Rifle Association reaches out to many partners to keep guns smoking in the United States.

So you might ask, "What's in a definition?" or "What's in an idea?" The answer is, "Actually, quite a lot." Ideas matter, for good and for ill; they help explain human progress and human deprivation. According to the nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist William James whose work on "Pragmatism" is well known, they have "cash-value." Global governance is one such idea.

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## Discourse, politics, and authority: (my) reply to (our) critics

David A. Welch

*Balsillie School of International Affairs, Waterloo, Canada*

I am grateful to my colleagues Patricia Goff, Mark Raymond and Thomas Weiss for their thoughtful and provocative responses to my original essay. The issues they raise are important and deserve full consideration. In the short space available to me here, I would like to offer my preliminary responses. I do so speaking only for myself; my students, whose deliberations I merely facilitated, may or may not endorse what I have to say – but I have no doubt that they will let me know.

There is much, of course, on which my critics and I agree, so I will concentrate here only on key differences.



Goff's main complaint is that we too hastily dismiss norms and discourse. She is correct to surmise that we think that "what we say matters" and that "the concepts that we think with matter." The whole point of crafting a clear, fungible, analytically useful definition of governance is to make sure that we can think and speak about governance as intelligibly as possible. And as I made clear in my original essay, I fully endorse the notion that prevailing norms and discourse empower and constrain thought, speech and action. We are all Constructivists. But the key question is: should we build "norms and discourse" *into the very definition of governance* when (as I argued in the first place) it goes without saying that they matter? Goff says yes; I say no.

Goff's first point is that "attention to norms and discourse will likely take us in a much less technocratic direction:"

Welch maintains that "issues are what one manages through governance" and that "the point of governance is simply to get things done." He says, too, that governance is about "bringing order to something that is in need of order." These statements are shot through with a bureaucratic vision – dare I say, they invoke a certain discourse – that encourages some questions and discourages others. But the questions that they discourage are vital to our understanding. Why are certain phenomena designated as issues to be managed in the first place? How do they come to be understood in certain terms and not others? Why do some solutions come to be favored while others are rejected, even considered unthinkable?

These are excellent questions, and I fully agree that "[t]heir inclusion in the ongoing conversation about governance could deepen our understanding." But I do not see how our definition discourages such a conversation. I believe to the contrary that it facilitates it. Nothing in Goff's reply suggests that she disagrees with the idea that governance is actually about dealing with problems.<sup>1</sup> I suspect that she would agree with me that there is no point bothering with governance in the absence of a problem to manage. But whether one does (or should) manage a problem technocratically, bureaucratically or, as is usually the case in security governance – the area with which I am most familiar – in a decidedly untechnocratic and unbureaucratic fashion, is an empirical question, not a definitional one. She may be right (if I am reading between the lines correctly) that a definition with the words "discourse" and "norms" built in might encourage people to approach the analysis of governance with certain ontological lenses and decidedly Continental epistemologies and methods; but if so – if we are so weak-minded that we need our definitions to signal and license how we are to approach the world – then encouraging the absinthe set means discouraging the Coors crowd. I see no justification for this. Let everyone BYOB.

Is our definition too "actor-centric," as Goff suggests? I do not see it. "Who does governance?" is just one of the questions that we can ask about any particular governance arrangement, and I did not signal that it had any kind of priority. I plead guilty to the charge that "Welch's questions suggest that we can identify who is governing" (this has never proven to be a problem for my students as they researched and analyzed the governance of specific security issues), but I emphatically reject the notion that I assume that "their intentions and motives will always be knowable." These are more or less clear depending upon the case – which demonstrates once again that this is an empirical, not definitional matter.

Raymond's complaint is that our definition says nothing about politics. He is correct; it does not. The facile reason for this is that the definition with which we started said nothing about politics, either, so our chiselling could not have left it on the studio floor. But if the original definition had included the word "politics," I would have chiselled it away in any case – not because I disagree with Raymond that politics "includes the contestation of fundamental values and allocations of resources, rights and duties," but because I believe, as he correctly notes, that "governance either takes place *after* [politics] or can be analytically *separated* from processes of



deciding collaboratively on (1) what the “problem” is, (2) the outcome being pursued as a solution, (3) by whom it will be pursued and (4) how it will be pursued.”

One cannot get governance going without at least a provisional set of answers to these questions. But a provisional answer is not a permanent one. Politics will continue. Governance arrangements get challenged. Usually they evolve as a result of political contestation. This realization highlights the importance of distinguishing governance and politics conceptually, for if governance *were* politics, then phrases such as “the politicization of governance,” “undue political influence on governance” or “political struggles over governance” would simply be wordy tautologies. Keeping the definitions of governance and politics distinct permits, rather than inhibits, the political analysis of governance. Raymond sees a bug where I see a feature.<sup>2</sup>

Weiss’ main complaint is that our definition does not work well when applied to global governance. I confess that this struck me as odd in view of the fact that I approached the challenge of defining governance in the context of a global governance course, and because I fully agree that a particular challenge of global governance (I would also add regional governance) is that, unlike national governance, it must somehow cope with the fact that there is no single overarching authority looming to backstop it. This does indeed make global (and regional) governance appear to be a form of “organized volunteerism,” which Goff would no doubt say is structured by norms and discourse and which Raymond would say is profoundly political – characterizations that I would also fully endorse. But what could possibly be more “polycentric” than this?

Admittedly, questions of authority and legitimacy are usually somewhat easier to answer when they arise within the boundaries of a well-functioning state (N.B., not a failed or failing state), if by “easier to answer” we mean less likely to generate the kind of disagreement that inclines people to take to the streets or to shed blood. But that does not mean that global or regional governance arrangements are devoid of authority or legitimacy. It simply means that their authority and legitimacy are more likely to be contested and/or to rest upon somewhat different foundations. Whether degree of contestation affects effectiveness is another of the many interesting empirical questions that we can ask about governance arrangements, but it is not a definitional question. The same can be said of their formality or informality.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the day, we want our definition of governance to empower, not constrain, analysis. In my view, these three thoughtful critiques represent yet more valuable stress-testing. My students’ definition of governance closes no doors to the questions we may ask about the relationships between governance on the one hand and discourse, politics, or authority on the other – or to the perspectives from which we may ask them. I am indebted to my critics for helping me see this more clearly.

## Notes

1. I treat “managing,” “dealing with” and “handling” as synonymous.
2. Parenthetically, I applaud Raymond’s attempt – unique in this exchange – to offer an alternative definition of governance. What he offers – “[G]overnance entails the collective identification of problems, the selection and implementation of responses, and ongoing efforts both to alter and reproduce initial outcomes” – is, however, a description of what governance “entails” rather than a definition of what governance “is.” I believe that this description is fully consistent with our crowd-sourced definition. I will also note that the word “politics” does not appear in it.
3. I note that Weiss takes the meanings of “formal” and “informal” to be unproblematic. While I might quibble with his particular understandings of these terms, I would argue that the fact that he agrees with my students that governance can involve either or both reinforces the wisdom of leaving these terms out of the definition.