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**THE MAGIC OF *GOOD GOVERNANCE***

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## **THE MAGIC OF *GOOD GOVERNANCE***

### **Abstract**

Governance is a widely used concept, in both the study and practice of public administration. Particularly in conjunction with the adjective *good* it serves as a normative standard against which the actual situation in countries across the world is claimed to be measured. In analytical terms, however, the concept shows shortcomings. It is, for instance, broad, and seems to imply or suggest consensus and uniformity. Yet these characteristics hardly seem to hinder an almost universal appeal and a widespread usage. Governance appears to function as a ‘magic concept’. Therefore, before it can be used in theory and research, considerable specification and elaboration are needed. At the same time its ‘magic’ character does make it useful, particularly in a rhetorical sense.

### **Keywords**

Governance, rhetoric, performance indicators

## **THE MAGIC OF *GOOD GOVERNANCE***

### **Introduction**

‘Governance, governance everywhere’, George Frederickson (2005) observes. Indeed, even without an extensive bibliometrical study, the present widespread use of the word ‘governance’ can be stated as a fact. Currently the term seems to be one of the most-used concepts in the field of public management. Practitioners may refer to *governance* as having supposedly succeeded *government*. Academics see governance as replacing more traditional labels for the discipline. It makes Frederickson (*ibid.*) wonder ‘Whatever happened to Public Administration?’

In this paper we analyze the role of the concept of governance, with a particular focus on the term combined with the adjective ‘good’. ‘Good governance’ is thought of as an explicitly normative variant of the basic concept. We aim at providing a rhetorical analysis of the functioning of this concept in discussion and argument. The central questions concern what is implied by the concept of governance, especially in its variant of *good governance*, and how it is used. Which functions does this concept fulfil and what limitations can be identified? By exploring both the range of definitions and modes of usage we will try to find out which specific rhetorical properties (good) governance displays. Thus we may better understand how the

concept is able to perform the role it obviously plays in both the study and practice of public administration.

As Hood (2005) suggests, big concept-words like ‘governance’ are key instruments in politics and administration alike. We assume that there may be a group of such concepts sharing specific features that provide them a somewhat ‘magic’ character. The analysis of the existence and role of one of those ‘magic concepts’ - governance - constitutes a central contribution of this paper.

### *Approach*

As indicated, we aim at an analysis of how the concept of governance and its explicitly normative variant of *good governance* work rhetorically. We focus on the literatures in which this concept is used. The problem, though, is that, precisely because it is so popular, the literature is impossibly vast. One paper could never cover it all. For this exploratory investigation we have therefore employed the work done by others. While the concept of governance figures in both academia and practice, we have especially focused on academic overviews and reviews. Certainly in observing modes of usage of *good governance* we do not claim any comprehensiveness. In particular we have looked at the texts of reports of supra-national institutions like the World Bank and the OECD.

In the next section we explore the concept of governance. Then we will focus on the ways its variant *good governance* is used, especially in the form of ‘Worldwide

Governance Indicators' (section Three). Section Four provides a discussion of the findings. Which functions and limitations of the concept of governance can be observed? The paper ends with some conclusions.

## **The concept of governance**

### *Variety of definitions*

'Governance' appears in almost as many versions as there are authors writing about it. A standard governance text (Pierre, ed. 2000) opens with two experts offering, respectively, five and seven different meanings of the term (see Hirst 2000 and Rhodes 2000). In the world of business corporations the term corporate governance particularly refers to the tasks and accountabilities in the relations between the managers and shareholders of commercial firms (e.g. Cadbury 1992). Distinct from corporate governance then there is 'public governance' (Kickert 1997). While 'public' here means 'governmental' several authors focus on a particular sort of governance practised by governmental actors and qualify the term by adding a specifying adjective, like in 'local governance' (Rhodes 1992). Comprehensive labels are 'new governance' (Rhodes 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000) and 'multiple governance' (Hupe and Hill 2006). There is for instance, 'co-governance' (Toonen 1990) and 'institutional co-governance' (Greca 2000), next to 'collaborative governance' (Huxham 2000) and 'governance networks' (Klijn 2005). Other authors speak of 'hybrid governance' (Hupe and Meijs 2000) and 'operational governance' (Hill and

Hupe 2009). It is understandable that Bovaird and Löffler (2003: 316) describe the attempts to ‘fix’ the concept as like trying to ‘nail a pudding on the wall’.

### *Classifying definitions of governance*

Some authors have tried to classify the variety of definitions pictured above. Kooiman (1999) came to a classification of ten different ways in which the term ‘governance’ had appeared in the literature up to that point. Indeed, distinguishing between a number of categories of definitions seems possible. A relevant dimension on which definitions can vary is their primary orientation. Some authors aim particularly at the practice of public administration, while others conceptualise governance with an eye especially on theory and research. Another dimension of variety is the claimed scope of the definition. Some governance definitions have a generalising aspiration, while other definitions are reserved for more specific phenomena, see Table 1. Thus we can distinguish between, respectively, historicist, mode-of-steering-promoting, overall-labelling, and analytical-framework-providing definitions of the concept of governance. They are briefly explained below.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In the first category authors use the term as a label to assign a certain historical phase in the evolution of (Western) government. After the eras of planning, the 1960s and 1970s, and the age of the market, the 1980s and 1990s, now the era of governance is said to be underway. Governments are supposed to have realized that they cannot act

alone. Neither they can expect the market to provide the solution to all problems (a conclusion reinforced by the global financial meltdown). So neither governments nor markets are enough by themselves - that is the general argument here. The engagement of government with other parties in society makes us all live in the current age of governance. Richards and Smith (2002), for instance, speak of the transition from the Weberian to the postmodern state.

In a second category authors identify governance as a specific mode of 'steering'. Usually that mode is presented next to 'hierarchy' and 'market' as the two other generic alternatives. Stoker (1991), for example, speaks of three paradigms: authority, exchange and governance. Governance functions as an equivalent term for steering via networks or network management. The latter refers to the ways governmental and other actors interact in 'self-organizing, inter-organizational networks' (Rhodes 1997: 15).

At least as prevalent is the third use of the term governance, as a new label for the object of the discipline of public administration as a whole. Kooiman (2003), for instance, speaks of 'governing *as* governance'. Within that generality he distinguishes three modes of governance: hierarchical governance, co-governance and self-governance. Pierre and Peters (2000) elaborate three models of governance. Under the title 'Whatever happened to public administration? Governance, governance everywhere' referred to above Frederickson (2005) addresses governance as replacing both public administration and public management as general labels for the discipline or field. In his contribution to an international handbook of public management he charts endless, complex differentiations among scholars as to how they conceive

governance. 'There are as many definitions of governance as synonym for public administration as there are applications', he concludes (*ibid.*: 286).

Fourth, the term governance is used to conceptualise the multi-dimensional character of 'government-in-action' as the object of theory and research. As such it is designed 'to incorporate a more complete understanding of the multiple levels of action and kinds of variables that can be expected to influence performance' (O'Toole 2000: 276). Lynn, Heinrich and Hill (1999; 2001) use the term as a basis for developing an analytical framework that enables the study of the 'logic of governance'. With their 'multiple governance framework' Hupe and Hill (2006) aim at a similar objective. They employ the concept for a meta-theoretical framework replacing the so-called stages model of the policy process (Hill and Hupe 2009).

Given the twofold dimensions of this typology the four sorts of definitions identify, respectively, contemporary government appearances; draw attention to network management as a third form of social coordination; specify general models of governing as the object of the discipline in general, and formulate programmatic questions, at a meta-level, for the theoretical-empirical research of that object. Trying to specify which kind of phenomena governance addresses in particular as a 'new' concept, Frederickson (2005) identifies one. He sees governance as an informative and accurate term when used to describe the extension of the state via grants and contracts, and to describe forms of regional and world cooperation. Other authors attempt to distill a specific relevance for the concept of governance from the whole range of definitions. As a basis for their own conceptualisation Hill and Hupe (2009: 108-9), for instance, welcome the concept of governance as drawing attention to



aspects of the study of government that thus far seem to have remained less prominent. The authors mention, first, a focus on action beyond the policy-on-paper (who is the 'governing actor' becomes an empirical question); second, the need for contextualization; third, attention for a plurality of values and the relationships between them; fourth, a rehabilitation of hierarchy, and at the same time, fifth, attention for other forms of accountability than just vertical ones.

Attempts like these last two aim at either pinning down the concept of governance as referring to a particular phenomenon (Frederickson) or using it as basis for further conceptualisation (Hill and Hupe). However, these attempts sail round the fact that the definitions-in-use of the concept are actually multiple. The more or less normative claim implied by the concept of governance is particularly deserving attention.

Although the four categories of definitions are presented as having a descriptive character, authors giving definitions of the first two types (in particular) may assert or at least imply that 'governance' is better than its alternatives. Sometimes the normative character of the concept is made explicit by combining it with the adjective 'good'. 'Good governance' is obviously meant as a norm. The World Bank has developed so called Worldwide Governance Indicators. The World Bank authors attempt to define the concept saying that governance is 'the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised' (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004: 3) - another extraordinarily broad definition. The indicators are presented and used to rank the quality of government, society, and their relations, on a world scale in yearly reports. Reporting on those indicators the World Bank makes a standard of *good governance* explicit, through the actual measurement and ranking of performances. Thus the

fundamentally normative character of the concept is made visible and ready to be turned into a set of prescriptions.

Against the background of this variety of definitions this section can be concluded by stating that governance is a word and *good governance* a norm; for the rest, everything is open. From definitions we now turn to the ways the concept is actually used. In particular we will look at the ways the World Bank has formulated indicators like government effectiveness with which it ranks countries in terms of good governance.

### **The use of *good governance***

#### *The spread of the concept of governance*

Apart from some early appearances (Cleveland 1972; Wittrock 1983) the use of the term before the mid 1990s was rare. Since then, however, the term governance can be observed as widely used by both practitioners and academics (see e.g. Pierre, ed. 2000). Some of the voluminous academic literature has already been cited above. It could be added here that, in a survey of the trajectory of North American public management scholarship Moynihan (2008) defined ‘new forms of governance’ as a major growth area. He did so comparing the number of publications in particular journals published in an earlier (1997-1999) and a later (2004-2007) period. Klijn (2008: 505) affirms that ‘governance’ can be viewed as a “growth industry”.

The concept of governance frequently occurs in practitioner circles as well. In its 2005 overview of management reform in member state public sectors the OECD described the central problem as ‘how to organize the public sector so that it can adapt to the changing needs of society, without losing coherence of strategy or continuity of *governance* values’ (OECD 1995: 13 – our italics). The OECD employs a capacious approach: ‘Governance refers to the formal and informal arrangements that determine how public decisions are made and how public actions are carried out, from the perspective of maintaining a country’s constitutional values in the face of changing problems’ (OECD 2005: 16).

Also in individual countries governance has become a guiding concept. In Finland, for instance, the then government entitled their 1998 publication *High-quality services, good governance and a responsible civic society: Guidelines of the policy of governance* (The Government Resolution 1998). In this document the government set out its reform programme in terms of nine ‘goals and measures of governance’:

- Public functions will be continuously evaluated.
- The responsibility of civil society will be emphasised.
- The role of government as the political leader will be strengthened.
- The structure of ministries will be reformed.
- The systems of accountability will be clarified.
- The reforms of central government will be continued.
- The quality and availability of public services will be improved.
- Continuation of personnel and employer policies.

- Enhancement of the steering of market-oriented functions.

Another example comes from the UK. There a major 2008 reforming white paper was *The governance of Britain* (Prime Minister 2008). As with the Finnish report, it seemed that ‘governance’ was so flexible a concept that it could accommodate almost everything a government does, and could extend to other social actors too.

The World Bank was one of the first (of many) public organizations to make extensive use of the concept of governance. Since 1996 the Bank has published the regularly updated, highly publicized and widely-cited set of ‘Worldwide Governance Indicators’ (Kaufmann *et al.* 2009; see also Arndt and Oman, 2006; Arndt, 2008). Given the objective of this paper it seems worthwhile taking a closer look at these indicators, in particular the one of ‘government effectiveness’.

### *Measuring good governance*

The regular, now annual, series of ‘Worldwide Governance Indicators’ (WGIs) published by the World Bank have six main dimensions. Each one is a composite index of many separate measures:

- Voice and accountability
- Political stability and the absence of violence
- Government effectiveness
- Regulatory quality

- Rule of law
- Control of corruption

The sheer weight of data going into these aggregate indicators is impressive. For the 2006 round, data were taken from 35 different sources provided by 33 organizations, adding up to 441 individual variables (Kaufmann *et al.* 2009: 2 and 7).

WGIs are one of a large number of sets of internationally comparative governance indicators – in 2006 Arndt and Oman estimated that there were 140 user-accessible sets to choose among (2006: 30; see also Besançon 2003: 11-32 ). Of these various sets WGIs are, by common consent, one of the most widely cited and used (Arndt and Oman 2006: 28; Van de Walle 2005: 439; Van Roosbroek 2007: 3).

The full scope and content of WGIs are too vast to be analysed within this paper. For illustrative purposes we will therefore concentrate mainly on one of the six dimensions - ‘government effectiveness’. This is summed up as:

*‘Government effectiveness (GE) – capturing perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies’* (Kaufmann *et al.* 2009: 6).

The World Bank defines ‘government effectiveness’ as a mixed bag of characteristics, including data relating to government instability, the quality of government personnel,

progress with e-government, the quality of bureaucracy and the amount of excessive red tape, the composition of public spending, the quality of general infrastructure, the quality of public schools, satisfaction with public transportation, with roads and highways and with the education system, policy consistency and forward planning (Kaufmann *et al.* 2007, Table B3, p. 72); see Table 2.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Coming to purposes, a curious reticence can be observed. The official website carefully states that ‘The WGIs are not used by the World Bank Group to allocate resources or for any other official purpose’

(<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp> accessed December 23, 2009).

Indeed, WGIs have become quite controversial, in some instances being strongly criticized by both academics and practitioners (Pollitt 2010).

The authors themselves have produced a lot of supporting technical literature, but this contains only a few, short statements about purpose(s) (e.g. Kaufman *et al.* 1999; 2007). Here are two of the somewhat small number of direct claims on this point:

‘(...) (T)hese aggregate governance indicators are useful because they allow countries to be sorted into broad groupings according to levels of governance, and they can be used to study the causes and consequences of governance in a much larger sample of countries than previously (...)’ (Kaufmann *et al.* 1999, summary of findings).

‘(T)he composite indicators we construct are useful as a first tool for broad cross-country comparisons and for evaluating broad trends over time. However, they are too blunt a tool to be useful in formulating specific governance reforms in particular country contexts’ (Kaufmann *et al.* 2009: 5).

Readers will notice that the second, more recent quotation is considerably less ambitious than the first. The authors have tended to tone down their claims as time has gone by and the measures have gradually come under more and more criticism.

Overall, one might say that WGIs differ from performance indicators like the ones used by the National Health System in the UK, in so far as they are not claimed to be of direct use to individual citizens. Rather they appear to be directed at aid agencies, NGOs, investors and the media - a more knowing and more organized set of audiences than the general public. At the same time it is a fact that the media seize on each year’s new scores, praising and blaming individual governments for their positions in the WGI league tables. More consequentially, perhaps, it is clear that some aid donors, including the US Millenium Challenge Account, do build the WGIs into their decision formulae (Arndt and Oman 2006: 41-46; Johnson and Zajonc 2006). This is the case even if the World Bank says it does not use WGIs in its own official decision-making. The World Bank’s disclaimer therefore does not preclude the use of the scores as argumentative material in the political struggle fought in the public domain. Clearly, using indicators as measures for what fundamentally is expressed as a norm of *good governance* cannot claim to be simply a technical exercise.

## **Discussion**

### ***Characterising the concept of governance***

Incontrovertably, the concept of governance has become widespread and is used in both the study and practice of public administration. How has the burgeoning popularity of the term been assessed? According to Frederickson (2005: 285) governance is a 'power word, a dominant descriptor'. While challenging its validity and claim to overall usefulness he distinguishes a number of characteristics of the concept (2005: 289-91). First, it is fashionable, and may therefore be here today and gone tomorrow. Second, the concept is vague and imprecise. In his view, virtually any meaning can be attached to it. Third, it is value-laden. The question of which values exactly the concept embodies remains open, but he suggests that some of these values seem to be straightforwardly anti-governmental. Fourth, many scholars using the word are, implicitly or explicitly, claiming that governance is about change and reform. Despite that connotation, Frederickson stresses that for him the underlying values of governance are not primarily about change, but about order. The concept then refers to 'forms of institutional adaptation in the face of increasing interdependence' (*ibid.*: 290). Fifth, from some governance perspectives, theory and research focused on government in the narrow sense, with a focus on its formal institutions and jurisdictions, are considered as outdated.



On the basis of our findings, Frederickson's characterisation of the concept can be extended. First, the most striking feature of the concept of governance is indeed that it currently shows a large overall spread. At the same time it is essentially an elite term, in the sense that it is commonplace among academics, politicians and other public officials but has not become a word which is either widely used or even understood in popular discourse (Hirst 2000).

Second, the concept is broad – as Frederickson indicates. Commenting on the definition offered by the World Bank and referred to above, Rothstein and Teorell (2008: 168) observe that: 'such a definition is just about as broad as any definition of "politics"'. Conceivably, the lack of a sharper definition might not be a problem if the concept in question was one where there was already a broad agreement about its meaning within the relevant community of discourse. This obviously is not the case.

Third, the notion of 'good governance' is clearly normative. Who could favour 'bad governance'? Like virtue, it is hard to oppose, but also like virtue, the problem is to know exactly what counts as good governance/virtuous behaviour, and what does not. Some things are fairly obvious - such as the avoidance of corruption, or the regularity of elections - but others are not. If we look at the hundreds of variables that go into the WGIs we see an amazing assortment, including, for example, the presence of active terrorist groups within the past two years and the educational qualifications of bureaucrats. Does that mean, then, that the UK - which evidently has hosted activist terrorist groups recently - should lose marks for 'poor governance'? And does it mean that developing countries with reasonably honest but relatively poorly-educated bureaucrats should be also marked down because it doesn't have enough graduates in

its civil service? And what relative weights should be given to each of these many variables? Should the same weight be given in all countries, irrespective of circumstances (as the WGIs usually do)? In a way, by bundling all these variables together to produce single index numbers, the WGIs obscure precisely the normative debates which, arguably, decision-makers should be having – debates about what is most important for *us, here, now*. This is not an argument against the concept of good governance itself, but it is an argument against mechanically reducing it to a statistical calculus, and thereby potentially diverting or even impoverishing political and policy debate, rather than enriching it.

Fourth, the concept draws strength from its claim to represent a wider, more inclusive concept than ‘government’ alone. Yet it is not an alternative to government, because government remains as one of its principal constituent elements. From a governance standpoint one ‘sees government as only one institution among many in a free market society’ (Stivers 2009: 1095). The danger here is that the concept of governance is made to appear to transcend previous tensions and contradictions, such as public versus private or bureaucracy versus market. Similarly, it masks traditional social science concerns with conflicting interests and logics. In a good deal of the writing about governance these conflicts are largely assumed away. Good governance is said to entail the steering of society through networks and partnerships between governments, business corporations and civil society associations. The implicit assumption is that if ‘good governance’ is used, these three segments in the public domain will then find a common interest, or at least a balance of interests that will be in line with the wider public interest. Empirically, however, it is not hard to think of policies which have emerged from broad exercises in consultation with many

stakeholders which have nevertheless proved to be controversial and/or ineffective.

Governance, it seems, is not an entirely reliable solution.

Fifth, governance is commonly presented as modern and progressive. It should be adopted across boundaries of domains of society, policy sectors and nations. And it could be adopted this way, because of its intrinsic characteristics. This is another aspect of governance's normative character. If 'good governance' is obviously normative (see above) the unadorned 'governance' is itself also implicitly normative, at least in so far as it is referred to as a form or strategy of governing that is intrinsically superior to traditional approaches. To be interested in governance, and critical of 'government-only' approaches, of neo-liberal 'markets know best' perspectives, of 'top-down' policymaking, or of 'bureaucratic centralism' - to position oneself thus is also to claim to be modern, progressive, and surfing on the wave of the future. As noted above, however, the empirical record seems to indicate that sometimes governance approaches succeed and sometimes they fail. To have some analysis of this might perhaps permit a refinement of the concept, at least for its more normative *personae*, but as yet we lack any such study.

Frederickson's critical assessment leads him to conclude that the concept of governance may explain change and reform rather than the functioning of jurisdictions. Governance is seen as somehow replacing the core of public administration. According to Frederickson, governance theorists look for all-pervasive patterns of organizational and administrative behaviour. In contrast, Frederickson makes a plea for a narrower definition of governance, confining it to the inter-jurisdictional, third-party and public nongovernmental parts of governmental

appearance. After all, 'the old-time religion, traditional public administration, is the basis of policy implementation in government, and government is an essential precondition of governance' (*ibid.*: 299). This is one way to go, but it should be noted that by narrowing the concept in this way Frederickson has cut himself off from many of the most common ways in which the term is used. This may be a logical move, but it is, as yet, a somewhat idiosyncratic one.

Although first steps towards an answer now have been given, we are still left with the question of why the concept of governance has proved to be so appealing.

### ***Governance as a magic concept***

In the past decade 'governance' seems to have been used as a heuristic concept that encourages researchers and practitioners alike to think of involving a wider range of social actors in public policy decisions than just the relevant public authorities. As such, the concept points to a crucial element of governing, i.e. the need to bring in relevant stakeholders. Simultaneously, however, the concept has been employed to construct spuriously precise and reified league tables purporting to measure how good governance is distributed across large numbers of very different countries operating in radically different contexts and facing fundamentally different challenges (Arndt 2008; Pollitt 2010). Obviously, the concept has a variety of meanings, as well as a multiple usage in both the study and practice of public administration. This situation gives the concept a somewhat 'magic' character.

In our analysis a magic concept has at least the following characteristics:

- *It is in rhetorical fashion.* It is currently *en vogue*, often by replacing something which is supposed previously to have been dominant, but now to be out-of-date (e.g. in the 1990s ‘networks’ replaced ‘bureaucracy’ and/or ‘hierarchy’, just as ‘markets’ had earlier tended to, at least in the Anglophone world, during the 1980s.).
- *It has a broad range of meanings.* It covers an enormous issue arena, has multiple, overlapping, sometimes conflicting definitions, and connects to many other concepts. Thus a magic concept is high on both scope and valency.
- *It has normative appeal.* It is hard to be ‘against it’. Part of this is usually a sense of being ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’. Therefore magic concepts are not merely in fashion, they are also perfumed with appealing values.
- *It suggests consensus, or at least the possibility of reducing previous conflicts.* It dilutes, diminishes, obscures or even denies the traditional social science concerns with conflicting interests and logics (such as democracy versus efficiency, or the profit motive versus the public interest).
- *It is widely present in the relevant communities, globally.* It is known by and used by many practitioners and academics, across geographical borders. Books, conferences, and special issues of academic journals are dedicated to it. As a ‘buzz word’ a magic concept will in particular feature frequently in government reform documents, the titles of new units, and reform projects in both government departments and universities.

In these terms governance is certainly a ‘magic concept’, but it is not the only one. For example, the concept of networks seems to have similar features; as does, for instance, accountability. Each of these appears as ‘evocative political words that can be used to patch up a rambling argument, to evoke an image of trustworthiness, fidelity, and justice, or to hold critics at bay’ (Bovens 2005: 182, referring to accountability). Magic concepts are typical of ‘late modernism’, in the sense that they are of high abstraction and wide generality, and, crucially, present themselves as ‘neutral’ – not part of a specific ideology or group of interests but somehow above and beyond previous disputes.

In the history of modern government ‘governance’, ‘networks’, ‘accountability’, and similar terms have been preceded by other ones and undoubtedly will be succeeded by newer ones. There is a dynamic or cycle in the use of a particular magic concept. Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s ‘the market’ became *en vogue*, while ‘government’ was expected to retreat (Pollitt 1993). Yet the fashionability of a concept has a limited life cycle. Obsolete concepts, which have used up their magic, are written off as no longer up to date. Moynihan (2008) made a content analysis of *Public Administration Review* and the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, the two leading American journals of public administration, for the period 1998-2008. He found a clearly diminished interest in the issues of classic public administration such as relationships between politics and administration, public/private differences, intergovernmental relations and implementation. The labels changed, the former ones obviously having lost much of their attractiveness. Besides, the underlying issues themselves seem to be considered as having become less relevant. A classic concept

like bureaucracy, for example, has, since the advent of New Public Management, been treated as if it were an object of archaeology rather than contemporary study.

Magic concepts can certainly perform positive as well as negative functions. They can significantly facilitate new orientations and frameworks, initiate the launch of new research strategies, stimulate campaigns for additional resources, and a number of other developments. Above all, magic concepts have the capacity to mobilize and to enhance the formation of new coalitions; within academia, within practice and particularly across their borders. These are not small or unimportant qualities. The multiple meanings and ambiguity of concepts like these implies that they may be used equally for 'white magic' or 'black magic'.

All magic concepts are elements in the fundamentally modernist narrative of progress. The way forward to a better-governed world is via *more* governance, more networks, and more accountability. There are many speeches and papers about how to do 'good governance', how to smooth the workings of networks and how to organize accountability, but few which ask the questions which go in the opposite direction. The latter would include when do governance solutions fail; in what situations should we avoid networks and prefer hierarchies; and when is there too much accountability hindering adequate task fulfilment at the work floor of government?

***Magic concepts as political language***

The added value magic concepts like governance provide is precisely the value attributed to them. By definition then, this added value is in the eye of the beholder. It is determined by the usage seen as most functional to the user, even if that usage differs from those adopted by other advocates of the concept. Let us therefore briefly go back to the Worldwide Governance Indicators as used by the World Bank and the development aid community.

The World Bank draws the data for the WGIs from a wide range of sources but has little or no direct control of how they are collected (see Kaufmann *et al.* 2009: 40-79). Overall, there appears to be a heavy weighting accorded to sources devoted to the needs of business relative to those of the common citizen (*ibid.*: 31; see also Pollitt 2010). The Bank subsequently assembles the data into a limited number of highly aggregated, composite indicators the meaning of each of which is often obscure, even to experts. Next, it publishes them, usually with extensive accompanying publicity. *Then* the parent body (the World Bank) partially disowns them, saying that ‘the data and research reported here do not reflect the official views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent’ (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi2007/> Accessed 20 November 2007).

The World Bank is a powerful supra-national institution. It is also controversial and has for some time been the target of criticism for its lack of representativeness (e.g. Stiglitz 2003; Woods 2001). In this particular case the WGIs strive to clothe what are, in effect, huge judgements of merit and demerit of particular states in a cloak of confidence-enhancing statistical methods, topped off with the badge of ‘governance’. Yet there is large-scale resistance to this approach. In 2007 nine of the World Bank’s



24 executive directors wrote to its President objecting to the very idea that the Bank would produce these kinds of figures (Guha and McGregor 2007).

This controversy helps to illuminate the fact that the appearance of the WGI as neutral operationalisations of a concept from social science, masks their expression of a specific normative ideal of what *good governance* is. When studying government - under whatever heading - the worlds of talk and action are not to be confused. In a public domain characterized by a plurality of interests one group of actors may criticize the quality of the indicators, and appeal for specification and clarity.

Simultaneously, another group may welcome the robustness and ambiguity of those indicators as creating room for multiple interpretations and hence may use them strategically. While in the realm of social science precision and systematic procedures are often hailed as unconditional prerequisites, in the politics of the public domain these qualities may simply diminish room for manoeuvre.

In the public domain the quasi-concreteness of numbers can be used as an asset. Several authors remark upon the perverse effects quantified data may have. Thus we have 'the politics of public data' (Starr and Corson 1987) and 'the politics of governance ratings' (Arndt 2008). Others speak about 'the politics of numbers' (Alonso and Starr eds 1987) and 'the politics of large numbers' (Desrosières 1998). Porter (1995) questions the 'trust in numbers', while Boyle (2004) asks 'why numbers make us irrational.' Seemingly going further, Power (1997) speaks of 'rituals of verification', Eberstadt (1995) about 'the tyranny of numbers' and Tsoukas (1997) even about 'the tyranny of light'.

Words may succeed where policies may fail, as Edelman (1977) discovered. ‘Political language’ refers to the way words – and numbers, actually, as well - are used in the exercise of power. Magic concepts can be addressed as forms of such political language. This goes in particular for *good governance*.

## **Conclusions**

What is implied by the concept of governance, especially in its explicitly normative variant of *good governance*, and how is it used? Which functions does this concept fulfil and what limitations can be identified? Those were the central questions posed at the outset. In the second section we explored a range of definitions of the concept of governance. In a two-dimensional typology four categories were distinguished in which we have shown and sorted the multiple meanings. We observed that at least two categories of definitions, although superficially descriptive, carry normative implications. These are made explicit in the norm of *good governance*. In the third section we focused on the ways that norm is used, while especially looking at the Worldwide Governance Indicators as presented by the World Bank. In the fourth section we observed a number of characteristics of governance. Governance appears to be one of a set of ‘magic concepts’, alongside networks, accountability and others. Each of them shares the following features: they are in fashion; they have a broad range of meanings; they carry a positive normative charge; they imply consensus or, at least, the ability to transcend previous contradictions; and they are globally present in the relevant communities, both academic and practitioner.

The identification of this set of characteristics has several implications. First, it means that the functions of magic concepts are determined not only scientifically, but as well, and perhaps even more, in the rhetoric and practice of public administration. Second, relevant criteria for assessing these concepts are therefore those related to methodology and theory formation, but also those of a more political character. In particular they can be assessed in terms of their success in influencing agendas and mobilizing support. Magic concepts are tools for persuasion at least as much as they are tools for analysis.

The ultimate test for the functionality of magic concepts lies in the practice of political discourse. In fact, that test concerns the question which actors in the public domain legitimize which claims with these concepts. Such claims can concern both 'white' and 'black' magic - the difference is a matter of judgement.

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**Table 1. A typology of governance definitions**

Claimed scope	<i>General</i>	<i>Specific</i>
Primary orientation		
<i>Practice of public administration</i>	Historical phase (‘modern government’)	Third mode of steering (‘networks’)
<i>Study of Public Administration</i>	‘Governing as governance’	Multi-dimensional framework for systematic analysis

**Table 2. WGI Government Effectiveness: ‘Best’, ‘worst’ and selected intermediate scores in 2008**

Denmark	+2.19
Finland	+1.95
UK	+1.74
USA	+1.65
Italy	+0.39
Afghanistan	-1.31
Somalia	-2.51

Source: Kaufman *et al.* (2009: 86-88). Scores range from approximately +2.5 to -2.5.