Governance as mythbuster

Gilles Paquet
Centre on Governance
University of Ottawa
www.gouvernance.ca
December 7, 2012

To be published in the March 2013 issue of www.optimumonline.ca
Bad breath isn’t anywhere near as bad as no breath at all

William Saroyan

Most organizations would rather risk obsolescence than make room for the non-conformists in their midst

Warren Bennis

Introduction

The notion of governance has been in use since the 13th century, but it has had a dramatic resurgence in public usage over the last few decades. This has been ascribable to a new configuration of circumstances that has called for a new word to capture a new emerging reality.

Those new circumstances (generated by globalization, accelerated technical change, more extensive intercontinental demographic shuffles and greater cultural diversity) have resulted in a much richer and more complex socio-political texture of our socio-economies. This has generated more and more wicked strategy and policy problems – i.e., problems where the goals are either not known or are very ambiguous, and the means-ends relationships are highly uncertain and poorly understood. Consequently they have called for the design of a variety of new ever more sophisticated governing arrangements to cope with them1.

To deal with such complex issues and ill-structured problems, the conventional approach to strategy and policy has proved quite inadequate. These issues do not lend themselves ab ovo to a precise problem definition; the resources, power and information necessary to define the problems and to design suitable responses are not in the hands, head, and soul of a single authority; and any resolution of such problems is dependent on collaboration from many individuals and groups in the megacommunity2.

Such a setting does not lend itself to the conventional management science approach in private, public or social organizations – an approach which presumes that organizations are governed by a leader who has a good understanding of the environment, of its future trends if nothing is done to modify it, of the inexorable rules of the game one has to put up with, and of the goals pursued by the organization. Such a Newtonian approach assumes a world of deterministic, well-behaved processes where causality is mechanically simple. Coordination is consequently presented as unduly simplistic: building on the supposedly well-defined goals of the organization and mechanical causality, the leader chooses supposedly apt control mechanisms likely to get the organization where its leader wants it to be. This surreal world is not unlike biology, when it was satisfied to classify animals by the number of legs!

---

2 A megacommunity is defined as a collaborative socio-economic environment in which business, government and civil society interact according to their own common interests while maintaining their unique priorities (Mark Gerencser et al 2008. Megacommunities. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 232).
There are, no doubt, many issues that are still amenable to this simplistic approach. But as the pace of change accelerates, and as the issues grow more complex, private, public and social organizations are confronted with more and more wicked problems. A meaningful inquiry (in the Deweyan sense) can only mean “thinking and acting that originates in and aims at resolving a situation of uncertainty, doubt and puzzlement”\(^3\). This calls for a new way of thinking about governing. At best, organizations can only govern themselves by becoming capable of learning both what their goals are, and the means to reach them, \textit{as they proceed}. This is done by tapping into the widely distributed knowledge and information in possession of the many, mobilizing the power and resources that potential members and partners have, and getting them to collectively invent ways out of the predicaments they are collectively in.

The notion of \textit{governance} – as effective coordination when power, resources, and information are widely distributed into many hands, heads, and souls – acquires then a different and much broader connotation than the notion of \textit{government} that has become roughly associated only with the conventional top down approach to governing.

This notion of governance has acquired a \textit{subversive content}, has challenged perspectives in good currency, and has generated much hostility both on the left and on the right of the ideological spectrum. For instance, in the public sector, the ideologues on the left (the progressive), have perceived governance as challenging the state-centric view of the world they hold dear, and the ideologues on the right (the conservative) have interpreted it as a potential subterfuge to sneak in a form of \textit{coercion lite} that they are most uncomfortable with. In the private and social sectors, governance bringing the meaningful stakeholders front stage has also generated the same sort of mixed feelings from the hypercentralizers and the hyperdecentralizers.

Additional hostility was generated when it was fully realized that the governance approach’s challenge to the ruling ideologies called for revisiting many notions they had become accustomed to (leadership, strategy/policy, accountability, etc.). As a result, governance has been shunned and denounced as useless, ideological and toxic\(^4\). And even when the governance approach has had, most reluctantly, to be ever so slightly accommodated because of the accumulation of evidence that mauled the traditional perspective, it has been dramatically emasculated and transmogrified to fit well within the set of presumptions in good currency\(^5\).


\(^5\) Having to modify one’s frame of reference is never easy. This is all the more difficult when one is pressed to abandon highly stylized canonical views that have been in good currency for decades to embrace a problematique which is still in the making, in the process of being developed. This is a phenomenon that has been observed every time an old established paradigm has been challenged by a new and emerging one. This explains why the notion of governance was sanitized by the World Bank (for which good governance has come to mean nothing more than eliminating corruption) or cannibalized by accountants, financiers and lawyers – for whom it has been reduced to the principal-agent problem, and to the machinations of board rooms or the fancifulness of transparency and \textit{ex post} accountability. However, the fact that these defensive and reductive reactions are understandable does not make them less disastrous.
This paper proceeds in four stages. First, it presents a stylized version of the governance approach. Second, it shows how this approach transforms key concepts in use. Third, it questions the persiflage about the governance approach by various groups most reluctant to reframe their view of the world. Fourth, it puts forward conjectures about the evolution of governance studies.

**The governance approach**

The governance approach is built on the discomfort generated by two foundational myths on which the conventional Big G (Government) approach is built: myth # 1 – that, in public, private and social organizations, someone has all the power, resources and information to take full charge; and myth # 2 – that such ‘higher authority’ takes action in policy and strategy on the basis of common or shared values.

As suggested above, in our complex socio-economic world, private, public and social organizations cannot most often be presumed to be operating under the authority of a single omniscient and omnipotent ‘leader’ operating in the name of common or shared values. An alternative and more satisfactory paradigm – the small g (governance) approach – would suggest that organizations operate under the guidance of an assemblage of partners equipped with quite different values, who each have a portion of the power, the resources, and information, and who hopefully may come to agree on certain principles and norms for conducting their business in a manner that is in keeping with their respective different appreciative systems, but allowing ways of vivre-ensemble that promise to generate effectiveness and innovation.

The small-g governance approach raises some fundamental questions that are never confronted head-on by the Big G government approach because they are wrongly presumed to be already resolved: the need to find ways (A) to ensure effective coordination among the quite different parties who have a significant portion of the power, resources and information required to steer the organization, and (B) to arrive at agreed upon principles and norms of vivre-ensemble (regimes of engagement) as a modus operandi to ensure an effective stewardship of the organization. These two tasks are daunting, and they depend on the development of a coordination science that has not up to now received anything like the attention it requires.

The conventional wisdom (presuming that someone is in charge, and that shared values ensure the requisite guidance) has failed, and, as a result, governing has faltered in all sectors as revealed by a variety of indicators of productivity and innovation. Effective coordinating arrangements among the stakeholders and principles of vivre-ensemble have not materialized. Conversely, the governance approach have been greatly sharpened and clarified: for instance, recent works have proposed an operational perspective on tasks A and B.

---

6 Government connotes here the top-down governing of organizations in the private, public or social sectors.

7 Much work has been done in many laboratories – of which the Centre on Governance (co-sponsored by the Telfer School of Management and the Faculty of Social Sciences) at the University of Ottawa is one – over the last 15 years. A list of the works produced by the Centre since the late 1990s is presented in the Annex to this paper.

The Detox Prism

This short book identifies five important interfaces (within organizations and between organizations and their context) where most of the coordination failures materialize, and it probes the proximate sources of dysfunction at these five interfaces: between the organization – and its employees (x-inefficiency); its value chain upstream (escaping fault); its socio-physical environment (externalities); its governance regime (hijacking by certain groups); and its ethical context (moral vacancy). Toxicities at these five interfaces are inter-related, and are at the source of something like two-thirds to three-quarters of the observed social waste. The inquiry, built around the Detox Prism, gauges the toxicity at these five interfaces, probes their sources, and suggests families of design repairs based on a mix of mechanisms of practical use in the different sectors.

This detox perspective is based on a systematic effort to lift both analysts and practitioners to a broader perspective point in order to broaden their outlook, to lengthen their time horizon, to help them escape from the conventional mental prisons, and to inspire effective and practical design thinking.

The various chapters illustrate how good design thinking can help to repair these coordination failures through the right mix of incentive reward systems and of moral contracts and conventions – that can shape the organization stewardship (or the nexus of mechanisms making up the guiding system) in such a way as to promote effective coordination, as well as the resilience of the organization, social learning, innovation and progress.

Stewardship

This second short book examines how the process of stewardship in private, public, and social organizations escapes from the traditional bow-arrow-target marksmanship framework of the traditional Big G problematique through redefining policy and strategy as inquiring system. It defines the way in which the inquiring system crystallizes through experimentation with prototypes. An inquiring system elicits thereby the way in which organizations redefine, as they learn, both the hard (architecture and routines) and soft (culture, behavior, principles, etc.) dimensions of the automatic pilot (if we are allowed this metaphor). And so they steer and nudge the organization along in the face of a surprise-generating environment and evolving interactions.

Explored in the book (both conceptually and in cases) is a sample of mechanisms that have proved extremely useful in stewarding organizations in the private, public and social sectors, and which are at the core of governance repairs. For instance,

• the setting up of ever more inclusive forums for effective multilogue;
• the negotiation of moral contracts defining well, yet informally, the mutual expectations of the different partners;
the design of learning loops enabling the partners to revise their choices of means as the experience unfolds, but also enabling them to revise the very objectives pursued through reframing the organization and its very mission when that proves necessary; and

the invention of fail-safe mechanisms to ensure that the multilogue does not degenerate into meaningless consensuses or stalemates, and to prevent saboteurs from derailing the collective effort.

Four key notions transformed in the small g world

In the sort of Quantum world of small g (governance), the ground is in motion, nothing is deterministic, and objects are defined by their environment. In this world, no single force dominates the governance regime fully. Depending on the moment or site, the governance regime will succeed to a greater or lesser degree in generating a stewardship that ensures resilience and innovation for the organization. This new perspective challenges some very basic concepts on which the Big G (Government) world is based. This is not the place to review the whole panoply of concepts made obsolete or modified somewhat as a result of this tectonic shift, but we may at least illustrate how four central notions have thereby been transformed – strategy/policy, leadership, accountability, and evaluation.

Strategy/policy and leadership

In the traditional Big G cosmology, it is presumed that someone is in possession of all the information, power and resources to guide the organization or the social system in choosing directions defined by shared values. In this assumed Newtonian world, strategy and policy entail nothing more than the design of a control system that will ensure the realization of the agreed upon objectives, in the manner stylized by management science after World War II.

The small g perspective is anchored in a more realistic appreciation of the real-world situation in all its imprecision and complexity: ill-structured problems, power, resources and information widely distributed among many hands and heads, no agreement on shared values in a plural and pluralist society, and a turbulent and surprise-generating environment continually changing.

In such circumstances, there is no way of meaningfully imposing ab ovo a problem definition and an algorithm to reach precise targets. The only way to tackle the issue is to design an exploratory inquiring system that can distill its goals and means by trial and error as learning proceeds. What is required to do this is an exploration engine capable of eliciting effective wayfinding through constant reconfiguration as the environment evolves and experience accumulates. The inquiring system is not only searching for the most promising path to the evolving objectives, but also and concomitantly the most promising alliances of relevant and useful partners and the most promising ways to motivate them to coordinate their actions, and to contribute to this collective task. It is from this sort of inquiry that one may expect a constant redefinition of the problem, and the sort of social learning likely to generate resilience and innovation.
In this small g world, the notions of strategy and policy are in the nature of dynamic searches for elusive and changing missions, and have become much fuzzier and more imprecise than in the world of Big G. The first victim of this transformation of the notions of strategy and policy is the notion of leadership. If no one is in charge (contrary to what is presumed in the Big G world) the notion of personalized leadership becomes much less meaningful. It has to be replaced by a much different notion of stewardship – a continually evolving assemblage of mechanisms making up the sort of automatic pilot that steers the organization in ways likely to generate effective wayfinding through effective self-refurbishment.

This is why governance is so subversive, and generates such strong reactions from all those who claim to be in charge: for them, it is imperative to defend and legitimize ‘leadership’ as a matter of their own survival. Consequently, an enormous literature has arisen in the last few decades to attempt to rescue the notion of leadership from its déliquescence.

Accountability and evaluation

Ex post hard punitive accountability, almost exclusively based on quantitative financial metrics, used to be celebrated in earlier times as a way to ensure discipline and control, but this has become less and less highly regarded in the new turbulent and complex world we live in. It is too reductive and myopic, and too likely to elicit both scapegoats (in circumstances where blame could not be easily attributed) and some deterrence of experimentation.

Transparency, quantophrenia and punishment are not panaceas, and in any case they cannot suffice. What is called for is a reframing of the notion of accountability in a manner that ensures that all the relevant stakeholders are fully engaged and held responsible, and all the important standards they live by are evoked in the creative dialogue and the creative practice from which the viable compromises emerge. This means a 360-degree accountability among partners: accountability that is forward-looking, exploratory and experimentalist in focus, and feeds effective and creative social learning.

In her Reith Lectures, Onora O’Neill has proposed a way to proceed: « Intelligent accountability, I suspect, requires more attention to good governance and fewer fantasies about total control. Good governance is possible only if institutions are allowed some margin for self-governance of a form appropriate to their particular tasks, within a framework of financial and other reporting. Such reporting, I believe, is not improved by being wholly standardized or relentlessly detailed, and since much that has to be accounted for is not easily measured, it cannot be boiled down to a...»

---

10 This rescuing literature (broadly available at any airport near you) is not very persuasive with efforts to identify the attributes of leaders and the ways such attributes can be acquired, but goes through fascinating intellectual calisthenics to salvage this notion – e.g., leadership without leader, etc. For an examination of the crucial differences between leadership and stewardship, see Gilles Paquet 2009. « Stewardship versus Leadership » in G. Paquet, Scheming Virtuously – The Road to Collaborative Governance. Ottawa: Invenire, ch. 5.
set of stock performance indicators. Those who are called to account should give an account of what they have done, and of their successes and failures, to others who have sufficient time and experience to assess the evidence and report on it» 12.

Recognizing (1) that the modern context is complex, and not easily reducible to simplistic cause-effect dyadic relationships, (2) that standardized measures of control are not effective, and may even generate, as toxic unintended consequences, a reduction in the level of trust, (3) that openness, transparency and quantophrenia may not be the unconditional goods that they are supposed to be, and (4) that it is absurd to pretend to manage our complex systems as if they were populated either by angelic Cartesian wantons or by a bunch of knaves and crooks – what ensues is a new focus on earned trust in the long-run, and much more attention, in the short run, to landmines like deception and misinformation.13

Instead of a sort of punitive accountability to hierarchical authorities, the new accountability is to partners, and geared to generating social learning: it aims at generating trust and collaboration, at putting in place the moral contracts needed to facilitate social learning, at building on a refurbished notion of burden of office 14, but mainly at stimulating experimental accountability – an accountability based on experience and geared to increasing the probability of success15.

This is bound to transform the evaluation function completely: no longer a way to assert control, but a way to feed social learning and organizational development. The evaluator becomes a partner in the R&D of an organization – developmental evaluation – i.e., a value-adding process meant to contribute positively to whatever is being developed16.

**Persiflage about the governance approach**

The notion of governance has been under attack from a variety of perspectives in a variety of ways, not only by various potentates in the private, public, and social sectors (for it was perceived as fundamentally questioning their legitimacy as leaders) but also by phalanxes of academics and practitioners who, having claimed exclusive competence on governing matters, have felt expropriated of their monopolies by governance studies.

These attacks have suggested that governance is useless, ideologically-driven and toxic – and when all this failed, reductive and Babelian tactics of encapsulation and sanitization of the notion of governance have been used.

---

13 Experts like Paul Thomas have put more emphasis on trust building itself (P.G. Thomas 2007. “Public Service of the 21st Century: Trust, Leadership, and Accountability” www.optimumonline.ca 37 (2) 19-24). The many ways in which one may build trust in the long term are quite important, but, in the short run, some focus on the major impediments to good governance is crucial. One needs to focus explicitly on some of the blockages, for the usual accountability apparatus would not appear to deal with major impediments like deception and misinformation.
a. **useless**

The most common attack on governance is that, despite evidence to the contrary\(^\text{17}\), leaders are in charge, and shared values exist, so that the present arrangements can be said to work well, and need not be repaired. The only problems that may materialize (if there are any) can therefore be cured by *management plumbing*: minor adjustments to rules of conformance, better training of managers, stricter rules and tougher accountability enforcement, and more transparency, would eliminate whatever wrongs are purported to be ascribable to poor governance.

*retort*

The documentation of pathologies of governance in all sectors makes pure denial less and less sustainable. As for the reliance on management plumbing repairs as panaceas, this is equally less and less persuasive when it is made clear that the central issue is not the minutiae of the principal-agent problem not being resolved, but the very notion of agency being grossly misconceived.

What governance questions is the foundational setting: sanctity of the Westminster regime (in the public sector) and of shareholder value dominance (in the private sector), or the dominance of the permanent staff in the not-for-profit sector – all issues usually swept under the carpet by conventional wisdom – while peripheral anomalies are played up and addressed via stricter rules, more transparency, and stricter enforcement. As a result, the governance flaws are simply occluded behind the re-assuring verbiage of accountants, lawyers, and the new training industry focused entirely on the protocols and etiquette of boards of directors. This entails nothing more than the best use of the *di Lampedusa principle* – to change everything (or seem to do so) in order that nothing change (although it seems to do)\(^\text{18}\).

The only way to break down this denial attitude based on learned blindness is (1) to hammer at the unrealistic nature of the assumptions on which the conventional Big G is built, on the omnipresence of governance pathologies\(^\text{19}\), on the costs of the governance failures, and on the futility of peripheral management plumbing, and (2) to multiply the examples of effective deconstruction of flawed governance processes with the help of the small g *manner de voir*, and the demonstration of its ability to detect pathologies of coordination, to understand the source of governance mishaps, and to determine what suitable forms of repairs might be.

b. **ideological**

When pure denial and the focus on plumbing does not work, governance is accused of being an ideological ploy by left and right wing squadrons: it is accused of neo-liberal sins by the left, and of collectivist bias by the right in the debates about public administration – as mentioned earlier.


In fact, governance is ideology-free. It simply claims that the social architecture of organizations has to be designed in keeping with a sound appreciation of the context within which they are meant to be nested. In that sense, the governance approach questions all the existing arrangements (old and new).

Private sector experts have been less immune to critical thinking as a result of both the massive changes in corporate governance on the occasion of the creation of the European Union over the last fifty years\(^\text{20}\), and of the massive corporate scandals that could not be occluded in America. Public administration schools and practitioners have been more resistant to reasonable arguments because of their greater fundamentalism – rooted in their view of the sacred nature of the State and of the clergy-like status of public sector workers\(^\text{21}\).

To neutralize those ideological attacks, one has to remind all of the Ashby law that establishes that a governing regime must be as complex as the organization or system it is trying to govern\(^\text{22}\).

c. toxic

When the first two attacks fail, governance is damned because, by presuming that no one is in charge, the very crucial notions of accountability and responsibility are purported to be fundamentally undermined.

This is a groundless attack. 360-degree accountability does not exculpate guilty parties but only recognizes that, in many instances, it would be abusive to declare personal or individual responsibility to be the dominant force, when such attribution cannot be defended given the circumstances. Often, responsibility is not personal but structural. The propensity to invent a guilty party at all costs – scapegoating – is indefensible.

Governance claims that traditional canons of conventional accountability appear to wish to salvage and rescue structures at all costs. When there is any question about flawed structures, panic strikes and accountabilism kicks in – a mix of accountability and cannibalism – that suggests that it is sufficient to sacrifice and consume certain expiatory victims so that the structure can survive\(^\text{23}\) This is the situation that governance denounces. Responsibility and accountability must be adjudicated properly and not emotionally, and punishment must be exacted when appropriate, but not only on persons but also on structures when they are at fault.

---


The irresponsible defense of structures and office holders has led the traditional cosmology to surf insouciantly over quite murky situations where the new governance cosmology would have been much more exacting and would have found flagrant evidence of lack of due diligence\textsuperscript{24}. So it is wrong to presume that intelligent accountability (new style) is less exacting than unintelligent accountability (old style).

d. \textit{encapsulation and evanescence}

The general failure of all those indictments – at the intellectual level – has not meant, however, that the governance point of view has prevailed. Another tactic has proved most effective in countering the governance surge: major actors like lawyers, accountants, academics, and journalists have carried out a successful dual strategy of \textit{encapsulation} of the notion of governance, and of \textit{sanitization/dilution} of its contents. Instead of facing head-on the broad perspective that challenged so many aspects of the paradigm in good currency\textsuperscript{25}, they have embraced the subterfuge (1) of reducing the notion of governance to fighting corruption (à la World Bank), tackling agency problems in the conventional framework, and catering to the mastery of some sort of etiquette of board management as the true nature of the governance challenge, and (2) of trivializing the content of this notion by allowing it to mean anything, including its very antithesis – \textit{government}\textsuperscript{26}.

Accountants, wedded to antiquarian scoreboards, have thereby completely avoided any critical thinking about unwarranted shareholder value dominance, and concentrated mostly on debating the difficulties of ensuring the control of managers by shareholders\textsuperscript{27}. This has led to finessing control mechanisms of management at the very time when it had become clear that what was necessary was a rethinking of the whole co-governance process (involving actively other stakeholders and executives) that would make a much better use of the \textit{affectio societatis} (commitment to engaged collaboration) and of the knowledge and imagination of senior management\textsuperscript{28}.

Lawyers have wallowed in the art of polishing the board composition and committee structure of boards of directors, and in elaborating sophisticated rules of transparency and reporting at a time when the very structure of traditional corporate governance is in question, new refurbished forms of which are being constructed. They have allowed the core of the co-governance process – the substratum of accountability and responsibility – to become obfuscated.


\textsuperscript{26} Recently, in an official document of the University of Ottawa Board of Governors, the planned School of Government was presented in translation as l’Ecole de gouvernance!


are being experimented with\textsuperscript{29}, and major restructuring and refoundation of corporate governance are the order of the day\textsuperscript{30}.

Academics and journalists (like university administrators) have more subtly eviscerated the concept of its very substance by granting a chameleonesque quality to the notion of governance, such that it can be plastered on anything one chooses to apply it to. This reminds one of Alice in Wonderland’s Humpty Dumpty’s famous line: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less." Such obfuscation can only undermine any meaningful multilogue on governance issues.

**Some conjectures about the future of governance studies**

There is no point in complaining about the blindness and the toxicity of the opposition to governance studies. In the face of any form of critical thinking, energized dynamic conservatism is to be expected from those whose position is assailed. The burden of proof always remains (and must remain) on the shoulders of those who are challenging conventional wisdom, and undermining the status quo.

This task has developed along four avenues in the case of the governance approach, and must proceed ahead:

- first, accumulating additional evidence of pathologies generated by the arrangements proposed by the Big G cosmology;
- second, developing clear and simple explanations of both the broad sources of these pathologies, and of the generic ways in which better coordination can be restored;
- third, ensuring a good understanding of the limitations of what governance studies may deliver, so as not to generate unreasonable expectations; and
- fourth, helping to improve the awareness of the central importance of organizational design and design thinking in the budding new cosmology.

**Pathologies exposed**

Exposing pathologies serves as revelateur of governance failures, triggers the sort of inquiry into why they exist, and leads to the search for alternative arrangements likely to do better. Much work has been done on this front over the last few decades – both at the Centre on Governance and elsewhere\textsuperscript{31}. But until recently, this work has probably remained both at too high a level of generality, too scattered in unlikely places of publication, and not sufficiently caustic\textsuperscript{32}. It has allowed the defenders of the status quo to escape unscathed through the most superficial rhetoric, by taking advantage of the intellectual timidity of those attacking the status quo.

\textsuperscript{29} See in particular the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the flexible purpose corporation in California, (Gilles Paquet & Tim Ragan 2012. *op.cit. ch. 4*).


\textsuperscript{31} See the Annex.

\textsuperscript{32} Excessive complacency and too much political correctness have often led to undue kindness and insufficient methodological cruelty.
The Centre on Governance has been forceful on this front: exposing the weak underlying assumptions of the Big G cosmology, and providing a variety of case studies of flagrant governance failures in the public, private, and social sectors. But future exposés should focus on particularly disastrous pathologies in the different issue domains and sectors, and be couched in sharper language if these criticisms are to break through the defense mechanisms in place. Nothing less will succeed in exorcizing this bunk, anchored in decades of self-serving rationalizations.

But all this will not suffice.

*alternative conceptual frameworks*

One must also, in parallel, deconstruct more effectively the dynamics of these governance failures in a manner that explains how the harms have been generated and might be attenuated. This can only come from a better understanding of the dual nature of the *rules of engagement* in the governance process: the *incentive reward systems* at the foundation of the engagement of the different actors and members, but also the *engagement mechanisms* at the core of the interaction order.

The first of these are at the core of the economics perspective, largely built on instrumental rationality, and have been probed extensively over the last few decades. The second of these are of a different nature, and emerge from a variety of systemic effects that depend much less on deliberate individual decisions than on *crowd phenomena* of all sorts (panic, contagion, synchronicity, etc. 33) that have remained quite opaque even though sociology has done much work on them.

A new composite toolbox will need to be developed in which this second set of forces, in particular, will have to be better analyzed and harnessed if one is to probe the foundations of the blockages or contagious propulsive impacts that continue to appear somewhat difficult to understand. Unless these phenomena can be explicated and deconstructed, it is difficult to believe that alternative arrangements can be constructed, and avenues leading to required correctives fully explored.

For example, different mechanisms at the core of this sort of dynamics have been examined by Mark Granovetter in his threshold models, or studied by Laurent Thévenot in his probing of the dynamics of the regimes of engagement34.

In the first case, Granovetter has shown how thresholds of interaction (like conditions to join a movement) may trigger avalanches of support that are ascribable strictly to the mechanics of

---


cumulative thresholds. This has been shown to be most important in explaining the dynamics of the Quebec student movement in the spring of 2012\textsuperscript{35}.

In the second case, Thévenot has shown that, through the use of the dual nature of coordination (by competition in economics, and by way of trust in sociology) one may construct composite arrangements, building on their complementarity. This sort of accommodation between the instrumental rationality of the individual, and various social norms coming into play, or not, depending on circumstances, can pragmatically generate various composite versions of effective engagement regimes\textsuperscript{36}.

Learning to use such a new outillage mental underlines the difficulties and challenges generated by governance studies – having to transgress disciplinary barriers in developing new conceptual frameworks.

\textit{limitations of governance}

The Quantum quality of governance entails a degree of ambiguity that frustrates the quest for certainty\textsuperscript{37}. It also ascribes such an importance to circumstances and context that scientific laws are most often beyond the governance expert’s grasp. Indeed, a central feature of governance studies has been the recognition that discovering laws may be overly ambitious.

At best, one may only be able to work with mechanisms – processes that may or may not work, depending on circumstances\textsuperscript{38}. Recognizing that such is the case entails a shift from the glorious search of \textit{grand theories} toward \textit{developing capacities to make good use of mechanisms} in the design of a less adequate texture of the new governance and the new stewardship of organizations. This often means having to be satisfied with bricolage and nudging efforts through trial and error.

The difficulty is demultiplied by the fuzziness in the vocabulary in use. Governance studies are plagued by the unspecialized language of suffering, and the language of persuasion of advocacy. There is, as yet, no agreed upon language of problem solution in use. Most of the time, when the word governance is used, it is still in the most general sense of “how an organization or a system is run”. Too often, this language is so vague that any commentary – even the most vacuous – may claim to be relevant. When compared with the very stylized, congealed and crystallized vocabulary in the canons of management, public and social administration schools (however disconnected from reality and surreal they may be\textsuperscript{39}), this creates a significant hurdle in the development of governance studies.

\textsuperscript{35} Gilles Paquet 2012. “Deux hoquets de gouvernance: affaire Montfort et grogne étudiante québécoise en 2012”\texttt{www.optimumonline.ca} 42 (2), 32-60. This might also hold the key of the dynamics of the Quebec “orange wave” in the 2012 Canadian federal election.

\textsuperscript{36} This is explored in Gilles Paquet & Tim Ragan 2012. \textit{op. cit.} ch. 1

\textsuperscript{37} Gilles Paquet 2013. “Gouvernance, science de l’imprécis » \textit{Organisations & Territoires} (in press)


As a result, it may well be that for the next while the most bang for the buck will be on the demolition front. Establishing what will not work may appear unduly negative as a research program, but it may be the most important contribution to make in the short run\textsuperscript{40}. It is only when the conceptual frameworks have been developed further that greater ambitions should be entertained.

\textit{design thinking}

However, this oblique approach through the prevention of harm should not deter efforts to develop the new \textit{outillage mental} to proceed. Already notions like stewardship, inquiring system, developmental evaluation, etc. are being increasingly used. But what is probably more important is the development of a \textit{nouvel esprit} – a new frame of mind which leads to approaching organizations in a design mode. It has already begun in the world of business\textsuperscript{41}, but it has been much slower on other fronts – which are still at the stage when motivations are only beginning to be probed\textsuperscript{42}.

Design cannot be reduced to problem-solving steps, fully programmable under a set of rules\textsuperscript{43}. This is unduly reductive, since it assumes that the problem space (like an actual maze) has a structure that is already given. The design process does not really start with such givens. Schön defines it as intelligent exploration of a terrain (125), as an inquiry guided by an appreciative system carried over from history and past experience, that produces “a selective representation of an unfamiliar situation that sets values for the system’s transformation. It frames the problem of the problematic situation and thereby sets directions in which solutions lie, and provides a schema for exploring them” (131-2).

Designing is a conversation with the situation that leads to experimenting with rules and guideposts, that, in turn, reveal conflicts and dilemmas in the appreciative system. Since participants talk across discrepant frames, designing “is a process in which communication, political struggle, and substantive inquiry are combined...(and it) may be judged appropriate … if it leads to the creation of a design structure that directs inquiry toward progressively greater inclusion of features of the problematic situation and values for its transformation” (138-9). Such exploration leads to learning by doing, and “involves inquiry into systems that do not yet exist”\textsuperscript{44}. This will require a new attention to organizational design and to the theory and practice of social architecture\textsuperscript{45}. This, in turn, requires a new way of thinking: \textit{design thinking}\textsuperscript{46}. This is a way of thinking that escapes groupthink and convergent thinking, which are designed to make choices, and favors divergent thinking, designed to create choices.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[40] One should not presume that this avenue is a blind alley, for harm-reduction through sabotaging processes generating harms is often quite efficient and effective. See Malcolm K. Sparrow 2008. \textit{The Character of Harms}. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
\end{itemize}
The focus of the inquiry in governance studies must shift from the exploitation of existing knowledge to exploration for new knowledge: a shift from routine management to the continuous reinvention of the organization, from a refining of arrangements in place to exploration based as much on intuition as analysis, and a shift from short term and low risk to long term and high risk undertakings\(^\text{47}\).

This new way of thinking builds on experimentation, prototyping, and serious play\(^\text{48}\), and makes the highest and best use of grappling, grasping, discerning, and sense-making as part of reflective generative learning. It bypasses the simple use of focus groups, public engagement exercises, and surveys as rearview mirrors into the future, because, as Tim Brown reminds us, Henry Ford used to say – if I’d asked my customers what they wanted, they’d have said ‘a faster horse’\(^\text{49}\). Design thinking is a systematic approach to innovation: not being satisfied with managing existing offerings and adapting to new users, but creating new offerings for new users\(^\text{50}\).

**Conclusion**

Governance studies have emerged as a result of new realities demanding new schemes of interpretation. Over the last twenty years, they have confronted well-entrenched problematiques that have resisted robustly to the invasion of this new paradigm. The conflict between the well-entrenched perspectives and the emergent one has been a dubious battle: the traditional cosmology has tried to immunize itself from the subversion inspired by the governance approach, and to a great extent its rearguard action has succeeded. This is not surprising since there is much resilience power in the sort of dynamic conservatism of those whose total intellectual capital is invested in the old ways. Yet the cost of the governance failures that are denied instead of repaired is becoming sufficiently large for many to be concerned.

Some of the pillars of the old way of thinking (like top down leadership) have been shaken. But the alternative governance problematique has not been fully worked out yet. So there are many, on the sidelines, who seem to be caught in a hiatus, in a state of transition: dissatisfied with the old scheme, but not entirely swayed by the new one, in part because of its unfinishedness, but also largely because of the new responsibilities governance bestows on the many who have grown satisfied with not being in charge at all.

Mythbusting has been only phase I: much of the work up to now has shown that Big G does not work, and that small g collaborative governance is not unworkable.


\(^{48}\) Prototyping means (1) identifying as quickly as possible some top requirements, (2) putting in place a quick-and-dirty provisional medium of co-development, (3) encouraging as many interested parties as possible to get involved as partners in designing a better arrangement, (4) encouraging iterative prototyping, and (5) thereby encouraging all, through playing with prototypes, to get a better understanding of the problems, of their priorities, and of themselves. (Gilles Paquet 2009. *Crippling Epistemologies and Governance Failures – A Plea for Experimentalism*. Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 8; Michael Schrage 2000. *Serious Play*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press 199ff).

\(^{49}\) Tim Brown 2009. *op.cit.* 40

\(^{50}\) Tim Brown 2009. *op.cit.* 261.
Phase II is an invitation to the sabotage of the harms uncovered through the phase I inquiries. It is not as good and promising as a road map, but it is bound to help clear the road ahead… perhaps sufficiently so that some will be tempted to proceed immediately to phase III – to explore new possibilities – the design thinking phase.

Annex

**Books on Governance produced by the Centre on Governance of the University of Ottawa over the last 15 years**

**Pathologies of governance**


**Governance frameworks**

19. Gilles Paquet, Tim Ragan
   Through the Detox Prism – Exploring Organizational Failures and Design Responses  2012
18. Marc Gervais
   Challenges of Minority Governments in Canada  2012
17. Tom Brzustowski
   Innovation in Canada  2012
16. Caroline Andrew, Ruth Hubbard, Gilles Paquet (sld)
   Gouvernance communautaire: innovations dans le Canada français hors Québec  2012
15. Claude M. Rocan
   Challenges in Public Health Governance : The Canadian Experience  2012
14. Gilles Paquet
   Moderato Cantabile – Toward Principled Governance for Canada’s Immigration Regime  2012
13. Ruth Hubbard, Gilles Paquet, Christopher Wilson
   Stewardship – Collaborative Decentred Metagovernance and Inquiring Systems  2012
12. Richard Clément et Caroline Andrew (sld)
   Villes et langues : gouvernance et politiques – symposium international  2012
11. Richard Clément & Caroline Andrew (eds)
   Cities and Languages: Governance and Policy – An International Symposium  2012
10. Michael Behiels & François Rocher (eds)
   The State in Transition: Challenges for Canadian Federalism  2011
9. Pierre Camu
   La flotte blanche : Histoire de la companie de navigation du Richelieu et d’Ontario  2011
8. Rupak Chattopadhyay & Gilles Paquet (eds)
   The Unimagined Canadian Capital: Challenges for the Federal Capital Region  2011
7. Gilles Paquet
   Tableau d’avancement II :
   Essais exploratoires sur la gouvernance d’un certain Canada français  2011
6. James Bowen (ed)
   The Entrepreneurial Effect: Waterloo.  2011
5. François Lapointe
   Cities as Crucibles: Reflections on Canada’s Urban Futures  2011
4. James Bowen (ed)
   The Entrepreneurial Effect: Ottawa  2009
3. Gilles Paquet
   Scheming virtuously: the road to collaborative governance  2009
2. Ruth Hubbard
   Profession: Public Servant  2009
1. Robin Higham
   Who do we think we are: Canada’s reasonable (and less reasonable) accommodation debates 2009.