‘Governance’ – in crisis? A cross-disciplinary critical review of three decades of ‘governance’ scholarship

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Abstract

There is growing evidence that traditional patterns of governance are coming under strain in many domains – in banking and financial services; in multi-national corporations; in the NGO and education sectors; and in government, at local, national, and international levels. This paper, a critical literature review, considers such challenges to governance and examines the ways in which different academic fields reflect upon and respond to such trends in their theoretical models and research practices. The review was conducted to open higher education ‘governance studies’ to new thinking that may have emerged in other areas, but has remained underexplored in the field of higher education.

To gain insight into this exponentially growing field, it experiments with a novel approach: designing an ‘analytical cartography’ that creates some ‘order’ across disciplinary, thematic, regional and theoretical fields, and proposing some possible new analytical approaches that provide additional ‘tools’ for empirical research on governance-related phenomena. The paper argues that if a ‘governance crisis’ exists, it cannot be seen as disconnected from a disciplinary ‘crisis’: although existing scholarship provides important insights into socio-political and economic phenomena that are often grouped under a common heading called ‘governance’, many of the currently used theoretical-analytical frameworks display serious limitations for empirical research.

The paper is based on a meta-analysis of three decades of ‘governance’ scholarship, searching through more than 54,000 academic texts on ‘governance’, across 11 disciplinary fields, from January 1980 to October 2016. The work was carried out as part of a four-year research project on higher education governance at the Centre for Global Higher Education at the UCL Institute of Education.
1. Introduction

In academic scholarship, as well as in policy and media discourse, there is growing focus on ‘governance’, and widespread debate about a ‘crisis of governance’ (e.g. Gill 2015, Ikenberry 2010, Colatrella 2011) and ‘governance failure’ (e.g. Afrasine 2009, Goldbach 2015, Jessop 1997). The crisis is said to manifest at multiple scales (global, national, local) and across sectors as varied as finance and corporate, the state, public services, education, healthcare, non-profit, and energy. Attempting to reflect on such phenomena, there are at least three broader scholarly approaches in ‘governance’ literature.

First, there are those that see a demise of national states in a globalising world and the “hollowing-out” of the state’s traditional roles (e.g. Rhodes 1994, Milward and Provan 2000, Roberts and Devine 2003), arguing that power is being more widely diffused to non-state and global actors (e.g. Guzzini and Neumann 2012). Many claim that such ‘power-sharing’ leads to a transition from “big government to big governance” (Levi-Faur 2012), with new patterns of “networked governance” emerging (e.g. Jordan and Schout 2006, Sorensen and Torfing 2007, Kahler 2009, Sridhar et al. 2009) and innovative techniques facilitating the “governance of complexity” (Jessop 1997). These changes, however, often lead to “overly complex” societies – hence a governance crisis/failure – that are increasingly difficult to “govern” as “actors, sectors, levels, sites, arenas, governance modes, policy tools, target groups, and publics” as well as “wicked problems” multiply (Koppenjan and Klijn 2004). In contrast to some other approaches, scholars here continue to have a strong focus on the state, but argue that more attention should be paid to shifts in power relations and the ways in which changes to “norms and values” challenge established relations of legitimacy and authority (e.g. Colleen 2015, Moeller 2015, Soltani and Maupetit 2015, Morten 2007).

A second strand in scholarship, while understating or dismissing crisis arguments, often de-centres the (nation) state from its focus and analyses (global) networks and governance practices. Scholars here argue that global governance is in “flux” (Pegram and Acuto, 2015), and highlight how these “far reaching transformations” lead to the emergence of competing “global governance architectures” (Sridhar et al. 2009) and new governance techniques, such as “experimentalist governance” (Sabel and Zeitlin 2012), “transnational regulatory governance” (Djelic and Sahlin 2012), “(global/euro/etc.) crisis governance” (Kramer 2011, Trautman 2017), “polycentric governance” (e.g. McGinnis 1999, Addy et al. 2014, Nagindra and Ostrom 2012), or social and participatory governance (e.g. Donaghy 2013, McNulty and Wampler 2015).

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1 Just two examples: there are 149 million hits for the keyword ‘governance’ on Google, and 1,678,245 hits in University College London’s library.

2 For a more detailed discussion of approaches to the state and state-building see for example the chapter by Bob Jessop in The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions (2008).
Finally, a third strand in scholarship – highly critical of the concept ‘governance’ – argues that framing research inquiries through governance is, itself, the problem (e.g. Eagleton-Pierce 2014, 2016, De Sousa Santos 2009, Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001). Scholars in this strand claim that the term ‘governance’ – along with globalisation, flexibility, fragmentation, employability – is becoming the “new planetary vulgate” and its diffusion is the result of a “new type of imperialism” “from which the terms ‘capitalism’, ‘class’ ‘exploitation’, ‘domination’ and ‘inequality’ are conspicuous by their absence, having been peremptorily dismissed under the pretext that they are obsolete and non-pertinent” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001: 2). Marc Auge, the French anthropologist, goes even further and argues that ‘governance’

implies that everything is a matter of competence and good management. We seem to have left the domain of dreams and revolutions for good. The concept of governance proclaims the end of history. It is the political watchword of a consumer and services society that should complete its encirclement of the whole planet before long; a society that would still care about its immediate future, but would no longer need to look further ahead. (2014: 51)

These concerns with and debates about governance, while more widespread and prominent in disciplines such as international relations, political science, public administration, and business and management studies, are not restricted by disciplinary boundaries and do not limit their topical priorities to inquiries about the state and corporate sectors, financial markets, or healthcare and higher education restructurings. In this context, then, it is quite surprising that although governance theories and empirical inquiries often cut across disciplines, there have been few attempts to do a broad-based cross-disciplinary survey of governance scholarship, examining – and engaging with – such issues comprehensively across the whole of the literature.

Thus, the main aims of this study are to 1) critically and cross-disciplinarily engage with debates that attempt to reach analytical and definitional clarity for the concept ‘governance’ and, drawing on such material, 2) propose new analytical frameworks and approaches that could aid empirical research on governance-related phenomena. While there are many publications on governance from a variety of academic fields, this study is unique in its depth and breadth, as it has searched and sorted through more than 54,000 academic texts on ‘governance’, across 11 disciplinary fields, from January 1980 to October 2016. After an original assessment and coding of the texts, the most pertinent and representative 1,000 journal articles and 250 books were selected for a systematic and critical review.

For the purposes of this study, ‘critical review’ is understood as defined by Grant and Booth in their A typology of reviews: an analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies:
A critical review aims to demonstrate that the writer has extensively researched the literature and critically evaluated its quality. It goes beyond mere description of identified articles and includes a degree of analysis and conceptual innovation. An effective critical review presents, analyses and synthesizes material from diverse sources. Its product perhaps most easily identifies it — typically manifest in a hypothesis or a model, not an answer. The resultant model may constitute a synthesis of existing models or schools of thought or it may be a completely new interpretation of the existing data. (2009: 93)

The following section will discuss the search and sorting methods, the resulting data sets, and some limitations that were encountered. The rest of the review engages with debates about the meanings and theories of ‘governance’, as they are discussed across a variety of disciplinary fields. Building upon clarifications that emerged from this process, and using the frames identified through the analytical mapping of the literature, the paper will conclude with a brief discussion of how such new insights can provide useful conceptual tools for future studies of/on governance-related phenomena.

1.1 Search methods and data sets

This study uses a combination of search methods and data sets. First, key handbooks on governance and its related fields (e.g. public management) were identified and read. While there are many such handbooks, seven books on governance, theories of governance, corporate governance, and higher education governance proved to be particularly useful3. This search was complemented with a search for comprehensive cross-disciplinary literature reviews of the governance field4.


4 Interestingly, only a few were found. One possible reason for this is that many literature reviews are carried out for project-specific purposes and might not be published and openly available for external reading. Another possible reason might be that such broad and comprehensive review exercises need significant resources and extensive periods of time that are both rarely available at university departments and in research projects. In addition, such reviews are often seen as an inefficient use of research funds, as findings often yield no significant results beyond what is likely to emerge in multi-disciplinary empirical research inquires and interdisciplinary teaching exercises. However, two such reviews were found to be particularly useful, both from 2008; one by Scott Burris and one by CHEPS (see references for details).
In a **second** step, the bibliographies of these books and literature reviews were used to find further relevant literature and identify individual authors whose writings focus primarily on governance issues.

**Third**, using English language publications in the University College London library databases going back to 1 January 1980, systematic literature searches were conducted, using the term ‘governance’ – first under ‘title’, and second under ‘subject’. This provided an original “hit-list” of approximately 9,900 books, and 45,000 journal articles. Titles of these publications were examined, with notes being taken on categories that might emerge for later sorting and coding. Next, a combined ‘title’ and ‘subject’ search was conducted, also going back to 1 January 1980. This resulted in identifying 1,332 books and 15,274 journal articles. However, as the number of journal articles was still too high to be meaningfully processed, a new search was conducted for journal articles only, narrowing the time period to articles published during the most recent five years: 1 October 2010 and 1 October 1 2016. When the combined ‘title’ and ‘subject’ search was conducted for the more limited period, the number of journal articles was reduced to a manageable 9,067. In the end, this final search provided the bulk of data for the study. It was assumed that, as literature went as far back as 1980, reading older and newer books in combination with a set of more recent articles would result in a representative overview of longer-term trends within the literature.

**Fourth**, an internet search was conducted for publication lists of specialist academic centres that have a focus on governance. Reading lists of university courses on governance were also compiled.

**Finally**, throughout the data analysis, when appropriate, additional topical and focused searches were carried out in library databases and on the internet to find academic texts that might be helpful in further examining questions that emerged during the analysis and thought to be insufficiently addressed in existing material\(^5\). Expert academics from the political sciences, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, human geography, management studies and higher education studies were also consulted for further advice on readings.

**1.2 Data processing**

As already stated, one of the main aims of this study is to explore some of the central issues in ‘governance studies’, paying special attention to attempts made to reach conceptual and definitional clarity of the term ‘governance’. To address this analytical concern, and – at the same time – limit the number of academic texts to a manageable number, data processing required a combination of sorting methods. All texts – primarily academic journal articles and books – that were available online

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5 In fact, this is how some of the most critical texts relating to concepts and theories of governance were identified.
were uploaded to Zotero software. This enabled coding and quick searches by subject, keywords, disciplines, topics, authors, etc. Some of the most relevant texts were also run through NVivo software for further coding and analysis. Paper copies of a significant representative cross section of key texts were also printed and analysed using more ‘traditional’ methods, such as colour coding, note taking, and developing a ‘dialog’ with the texts by repeatedly turning to them for testing and recoding when new findings and arguments emerged from the analysis of other texts. Books that were available only in hard copy were read and notes taken in Microsoft Word and/or Zotero.

The sorting of the texts was achieved in several steps. First, science, engineering, system data management, and technology books and articles were excluded as, given time constraints and the focus of the review, it would have been both impossible and irrelevant to explore them. This meant that even when science texts dealt with interdisciplinary issues (e.g. science, ethics, and philosophy) they were excluded as outside the scope of this study (e.g. issues of bioethics reproduction governance, patenting and governance, ethics of data management governance technologies, digital governance). This first sorting reduced the number of articles by approximately 3,000 and books by approximately 300.

Second, from the remaining books and articles, those concerned with very specific and/or narrow topics were excluded (e.g. while texts on governance of pension schemes were considered if discussed in broader terms, articles on governance of specific aspects of the Australian superannuation industry were not included). This further narrowed the search to approximately 2,800 articles and 700 books.

Third, for the remaining articles and books, abstracts, structure, tables of contents and conclusions received more detailed reading. Through this process the rough codes and categories that emerged from the initial coding (the 9,900 books and 45,000 articles) were refined, and a section of these texts – approximately 1,000 articles and 250 books – were categorised as ‘key’ readings. These texts were read in detail to be able to reflect both on their main arguments and empirical findings (with books, this often meant that several chapters or whole books were read).

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6 Zotero is a free and open-source reference management software to manage bibliographic data and related research materials.  
7 NVivo is a qualitative data analysis computer software used when working with large amounts of text-based and/or multimedia information.  
8 However, after reading some of these science/technology articles, it needs to be noted that future research would likely benefit from new and innovative approaches emerging from the sciences, just as anthropology did when, for example, researchers reached out to chrono-geography and developmental psychology to study social/cognitive time (Gell 1992).  
9 The numbers are approximations because, as pointed out earlier in the text, after initial library searches further searches were carried out as points of view, arguments, etc. needed to be clarified.
1.3 Limitations and bias

This critical review, as is the case with most such inquiries, has its limitations and biases. First, and most importantly, there is a significant language barrier as only English language texts were searched in compiling the sample. This creates a strong ‘cultural’ bias, as no texts written for non-English language publications are considered in the literature review, unless they appeared as references or quotes in writings of authors that publish in English.

Further, although this is not a limitation that emerges from this literature review’s selection methods, the gatekeeping mechanisms of the academic publishing industry can have the effect of restricting some of the most innovative and critical ideas on governance entering ‘mainstream’ academic science (e.g. Dudley 2013, Colquhoun 2011, Mihesuah 2004, Barzilai-Nahon 2009, Siler, Lee and Bero 2015, Olohan 2014). To counterbalance this limitation, broad internet searches were conducted, but again – those searches being in English – limitations emerged that can be attributed to the language barrier.

Also, the keyword ‘governance’ most likely did not capture some of the relevant literature. For example, organisational studies that concern themselves with issues of ‘governance’ but are not framed as such in titles and subject areas for library cataloguing might be missing. Some empirical studies that explore issues that are often seen to be linked to governance-phenomena might have been missed as well, because – for example – authors might be critical of the concept ‘governance’, and so would not use the term in their titles, abstracts and keywords. To address this possible shortcoming, consultations with experts and bibliographical cross-referencing were employed.

In addition, after the decision was taken to present findings in the form of a ‘critical review’, questions emerged during the writing process as to how to find a balance between, on the one hand, summative parts aimed at accurately reflecting the contributions of governance scholarship to understanding governance-related phenomena, and, on the other hand, critical observations meant to highlight problems, shortcomings and gaps within this literature. Although extra care was taken to keep such a balance, and colleagues in the field of governance studies were consulted, this literature review – because of its choice to offer a detailed critical discussion of its material – might be shorter on the summative and stronger on the critical parts.

Finally, and this can apply to virtually any/all research, it was recognised that limitations have the potential to emerge from a researcher’s subjectivity and academic background, indicated here as ‘disciplinary bias’. Although the present researcher has a broad and interdisciplinary academic background – having studied

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communication, nationalism studies, psycho-pedagogy, sociology, anthropology, discourse analysis, and policy and higher education studies – a significant percentage of the texts came from beyond these academic fields. While all care was taken to keep the search as broad and open as possible, it is recognised that in the interpretations of those texts and the analytical frames developed, disciplinary bias has the potential to emerge. Thus, the review was shared with academic colleagues from a variety of disciplinary/interdisciplinary backgrounds and resulting feedback was noted and received serious consideration.

2. Governance: Analytical mapping and emerging common frames

Berenskoetter (2016, 2017) argues in the introductory chapter of his ground-breaking new edited volume on concepts, that

[m]ost of the time, we take the meaning of our concepts for granted. (…) Usually concepts tend to be reduced to static “variables”, which are broken down into “indicators”, without taking into account the rich history and multiple meaning of the concept underpinning the variable. The reasons for this range from the modern belief that we actually can arrive at the true meaning of a concept, which is singular and simple, to the more pragmatic view that opening up concepts sows unnecessary confusion and goes against their very purpose of reducing complexity. And so we usually resort to an authoritative definition that settles the matter by quoting a well-known scholar who presumably thought about the matter carefully and whose definition is popular and/or makes intuitive sense. Having fixed the meaning of our concept (or so we believe) we go on with our research. (2016: 1-2)

Berenskoetter’s description – although not specifically written about governance studies – frames well the modus operandi of the governance field. As will be seen in the following pages, it is one of the most widespread approaches in governance scholarship, and leads to the emergence of a ‘scientific discursive space’ where scholars frequently – even if inadvertently – reproduce structural imbalances of the field.

Thus, one of the main aims of this critical literature review has been to look at such concepts and definitions not only in isolation but as composite material and tease out strengths and weaknesses of the whole field – characteristics that may be missed when looking only for one or another aspect of a ‘governance’ problematique. It is for this reason that this review will not offer its own definition of ‘governance’ and so it must suffice to accept the comprehensive, but not exhaustive, summary that has emerged from the overview of the many definitions of governance found in scholarship. As a result, the following is not a ‘working definition’, in the sense that it is in no way meant to be applied to field research, as described by Berenskoetter above. It is instead a way to offer a concise summary of the issues and concepts
most commonly associated with governance. Thus, governance emerges from scholarship as

a set of structures, regulations, rules, norms, standards, mechanisms, processes and practices – formal, informal and embodied – that both regulate, coordinate, steer, and/or orchestrate (inter)actions as well as (re)produce socio-cultural, economic and political relations and values, while at the same time impact upon, define, and determine the outcomes of such interactions. The scope is usually to achieve field\textsuperscript{11} specific, practice oriented goals – broadly and/or narrowly defined. All these understandings of governance carry the (implicit) assumption that actors are embedded in, determined by and also shape such structures and processes.

As noted above, current governance literature frequently uses isolated aspects of this composite ‘definition’, attempting to limit the focus of empirical research to a ‘manageable’ level. However, attempts to limit the scope of analysis can often result in a loss of understanding connections, problems and phenomena, while at the same time still reproducing weaknesses that presently exist in the field. One such weakness, organising governance-related phenomena along oppositional binaries, is mirrored well in the above composite definition of governance. The summary above makes it easier to see these embedded oppositional binaries: governance as both static and dynamic, structure and process, productive and reproductive, non-reflexive and self-reflexive, external and embodied, and both as direct social action and modes of coordination of social action.

While there are important studies that address these inconsistencies within the concept (e.g. Offe 2009, Hofferberth 2014, Eagleton-Pierce 2014, 2016) they are frequently rendered to the margins of the field and/or their findings are not considered when analytical models are designed and used across the scholarship. Thus, when narrower and focused definitions are employed, contradictions and limitations that emerge often remain underexplored or hidden, oppositional binaries are reproduced, and analytical paradoxes continue to persist within the field. The following sections engage with and discuss some of these issues.

2.1 ‘Pre-determined’ commonalities: Shared approaches across the scholarship

Following the initial selection of the key books and articles, the remaining texts were sorted into categories based on shared commonalities. In the first instance, this meant identifying ‘pre-determined commonalities’, so called because, rather than emerging from within the texts during the analysis, they fit already existing categories that are frequently used to sort scholarship into disciplinary fields (e.g. economics,

\textsuperscript{11} Field understood as health, higher education, education, corporate, non-profit, environmental, urban etc.}
political science, sociology), thematic fields (e.g. theory, methods, healthcare, education, corporations, etc.), and regional focus (e.g. global/local, America(s), Asia, Africa, Europe, UK, France, etc.).

Table 1. (Some) pre-determined commonalities in governance scholarship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplinary fields</th>
<th>Thematic field/ problem-focused approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Governance’ as a frequent/reoccurring focus for the following academic disciplines/fields:</td>
<td>Most frequent thematic fields:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• International Relations</td>
<td>• Theories/research methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political Science</td>
<td>• Corporate governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Management Studies</td>
<td>• Healthcare governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Business Studies</td>
<td>• Non-profit governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economics</td>
<td>• Public sector governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• (International) Law</td>
<td>• Education/HE governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public Policy/Administration</td>
<td>• Urban governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Development Studies</td>
<td>• Energy (sector) governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Higher Education Studies</td>
<td>• Environmental governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less frequently, but also a focus in the following disciplines/fields:</td>
<td>• Financial/fiscal/market governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sociology</td>
<td>• Central banks &amp; governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Anthropology</td>
<td>• Development &amp; governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• History</td>
<td>• Human rights &amp; governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regional Studies</td>
<td>‘Alternative’ governance (e.g. social enterprise; governance through social learning; governance through epistemic communities/creative commons are often grouped under this label by scholars)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Geography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is common with these types of sortings, none of the fields are mutually exclusive and so there were significant overlaps among them. In other words, it would have been possible for individual texts to be categorised according to several different pre-determined commonalities, e.g. if a single text was to be categorised as economics, management, theory, region/Americas, healthcare, development, and corporate.

Throughout the sorting process it became clear that, across fields, there is a high level of ‘borrowing/transfer’ of theories, methods and empirical and policy approaches, often based upon scholars’ attempts to create and consolidate the field of ‘governance studies’. As a result, shared terminology and theoretical frameworks were frequently found to be used across disciplinary and thematic fields. However, although theory and terminology are shared, understandings of what exactly ‘governance’ might mean in each empirical context varied. To address
problems emerging from the co-existence of multiple meanings, perceived as being a weakness of the field, several handbooks have been published recently by large academic publishing houses. Most of these volumes attempt to establish interdisciplinary and shared understandings for governance and suggest common theoretical and methodological approaches to governance problematiques. Some of the most well known and widely used are The Oxford Handbook of Governance (2012), Handbook of the International Political Economy of Governance (2014), Handbook of Global Economic Governance: Players, Power and Paradigms (2014), The European Union and Global Governance: A Handbook (2010), Handbook of Transnational Governance: Institutions and Innovations (2011).

Another common endeavour to resolve analytical-comparative inconsistencies has been to take a ‘problem-oriented’ approach, identify (a few/some) ‘relevant’ governance definitions and theories, treat them as easily deployable across disciplinary and thematic fields, and use them as points of reference and comparison in various empirical contexts. Some examples:

- Research on public sector, non-profit, and environmental governance often uses collective action theory to explore the provision or lack of provision of public goods, (with some of the main concepts initially emerging from the works of the economist Elinor Ostrom, e.g. Ostrom et al. 1992, 1994, 1998, 2003, 2005, 2007), while agency theory is used to explore the ‘principal-agent dilemma’ and the risks and moral hazards that emerge from individual interests being in conflict with collective interests (e.g. Dowding 2011).
- Healthcare and human rights governance often turn to systems, networks and orchestration theory to explain the rise of markets in transnational and public sector governance (e.g. Salter and Faulkner 2011, Krupa 2010, Mahon and Mcbride 2009) and/or to explore the role of third-party actors in shared governance objectives and emerging new governance ‘architectures’ (e.g. Pegram 2015a, 2015b); or, health scholarship uses theories of professional governance and self-regulation to explore the power-balance between professions and the state (e.g. Sheaff 2003, Kuhlmann, Allsop and Saks 2009).
- In corporate and global healthcare governance, stewardship and new public management theories are often used to explore and explain board-CEO-shareholder-stakeholder relations (e.g. Tremblay 2012, Gomez 2004, Menzel 2005).
- Central banks and (financial) markets governance research often uses institutional heterarchy theory to explain the series of institutional innovations that have emerged as responses to successive financial crises (e.g. Eisner 2011, Afrasine 2009, Halsall et al. 2013).
- Research on EU-nation state relations often uses theories of meta-governance to explore so-called “self-regulating governance arenas” where states and regional and transnational organisations and ‘structures’ interact (e.g. Jessop 2004, 2011).
Although such approaches proved to be productive in the instances referenced above, after close reading of the literature, the conclusion was reached that relying on such approaches would not have been productive for this critical review as they might have imposed external and abstracted frames on the material. That is, it would have meant considering only one type of pre-determined commonality, that of ‘theory’, from the thematic fields in the table above. This, in turn, could have led to an impoverished and narrow comparative-interpretative framework, excluding certain types of texts that did not fit the ‘theory(ies)’, while – paradoxically – resulting in an unmanageable variety at the level of theories, reproducing disciplinary factions and debates that have, for decades, characterised the governance field.

In addition, as the review of existing scholarship highlighted, such theoretical ‘borrowing’ often leads to superficially designed comparative frameworks that ignore or downplay a significant part of the relevant empirical and contextual variables. This happens because, during the comparative process, scholars often disregard the fact that such frameworks are not easily or directly transposable, as a great number of the ‘borrowed’ theoretical and conceptual approaches are deeply rooted in disciplinary traditions (e.g. Dale and Robertson write extensively about problematic comparisons that still ‘haunt’ education governance scholarship – e.g. 2016, 2015, 2013, 2009).

Thus, to follow the above discussed approaches in governance scholarship would have defeated this review’s broader aim to create a synthesis of and from the existing scholarly work: an ‘analytic cartography’ that helps inform future research on issues seen as falling under the phenomenon called ‘governance’. It was felt that, despite recent concerted scholarly efforts to create more ‘order’ and consensus than currently exists within the field, for this critical review a different type of analysis was needed as the existing ‘pre-determined commonalities’ did not allow for an in-depth cross-sectional comparison of the scholarship.

2.2 ‘Emergent commonalities’

To reconcile some of the above shortcomings, in this review a different approach was taken. In a second analytical step, the texts were searched for ‘emergent commonalities’, so-called because they seemed to be present – separately or combined – as key focuses and frames in a significant part of existing governance scholarship. This meant that, at first, the whole body of ‘governance scholarship’ had to be approached as a scholarly ‘discursive space’ across which shared terms, vocabularies, concepts, categories, arguments and theories needed to be identified, and then selected and sorted into categories. Once approached this way, the task was to examine this ‘discursive space’ and find the most centrally important ‘emergent commonalities’ within it. Then, in a next step, the analysis needed to return to empirical research findings in governance scholarship to discover and understand, if not all, at least some of the ‘silences’ – that is, analytical and empirical
phenomena that were unaccounted for – throughout existing scholarship. Then, such ‘silences’ – structural and otherwise – needed to be ‘accounted for’ and problematised to understand the reasons for those silences.

This approach applies a different analytic lens to the ways in which most scholarship attempts to cope with seemingly inconsistent and conflicting definitions of governance. Definitions are attempts to draw ‘boundaries’ around analytical and empirical phenomena, predetermining what can and what cannot be included in understandings of a concept, while the approach taken here broadened the analytical framework to keep it as open, inclusive and comparative as possible. As a result, this present review has yielded insights that are very different from those that have emerged from papers that focus primarily on conceptual and definitional clarifications.

2.2.1 The six domains in/of governance scholarship

After multiple rounds of coding and analytical mapping, six emergent commonalities remained: ‘actors’, ‘activities/practices’, ‘techniques/methods’, ‘scope’, ‘values’ and ‘outcomes’. All emerged as ‘answers’ to one central exploratory question, posed to address the comparative and synthesising aims of this literature review: Based on the scholarship, what are the common and/or most prominent problematiques within governance?

These ‘emergent commonalities’, once identified, drew attention to a set of shared and central organising questions that frequently underlie governance studies and cut across social science disciplines, thematic fields and empirical contexts:

1. Who are the actors in governance?
2. What practices/activities are associated with governance?
3. What ‘governance’ techniques/mechanisms are deployed?
4. What is the scope of governance?
5. On what values is governance based?
6. What are the outcomes of governance?

These basic questions, in turn, pointed towards a series of related sub-questions within scholarship, some of which ask: What are the relationships among ‘governance’ actors? How are these relations negotiated? What means do different ‘governance’ actors have available to be able to negotiate successfully/productively for their aims, goals and interests? Why do these actors act as they do? What formal and informal rules restrict or enable their actions? How are such rules communicated, imposed, implemented and enforced?

As more and more questions emerged, they brought into focus the relational and dynamic dimensions of the six ‘emergent commonalities’. That, in turn, prompted their conceptualisation as ‘domains’, rather than static and insulated ‘categories’. To
a significant degree, these domains form an ‘armature’ around which governance scholarship is built. Regardless of disciplinary and thematic fields, the intersections of these six domains – in a great variety of constellations – are usually seen to ‘produce’ ‘governance’.

To illustrate these relationships and intersections, all six domains were incorporated into the diagram below (Figure I). The arrows are indicative of the relational and dynamic dimensions that emerge within and across domains.

In the graphic, these domains are intentionally separated by dotted (rather than solid) lines. This is to indicate that they cannot be explored or understood in isolation. Presenting them as separate domains throughout this literature review emerges from the fact that a significant part of existing governance scholarship tends to view and approach them as separate issues/problems and focus attention on the relationships among and within these domains, as well as on their relation to the central field, where ‘governance’ is assumed to be located. Beyond that, although these domains are allocated roughly equal shares of the circle in the graphic, this is not meant to indicate that they are perceived as having equal analytical weight. It is rather to emphasise their more or less equal presence in current scholarship.

The ways in which the issues pertaining to the six domains are discussed within existing scholarship is synthesised and explained below.
2.2.1.1 Actors

The range of ‘actors’ discussed in the scholarship is relatively broad, and has grown over the past few years. Actors that are most frequently the focus of governance studies include: states/governments, bureaucrats/bureaucracies, central banks, companies/businesses, ‘markets’, trade unions, industry players, the media, global/international organisations (including the UN, OECD, IMF, World Bank, as well as ‘global’ universities), civil society, experts, regulators, CEOs, boards, senates, NGOs, and transnational communities of interest and/or practice (e.g. epistemic, scientific, professional, business, online/virtual communities, and the ‘international community’ which includes the EU and states acting through supranational agreements and organisations).

There is a clear hierarchy in the frequencies of references to and centrality of different actors: while ‘the state’ as an actor is almost always present (even when it is an actor that is ‘denied agency’ – i.e. when scholars talk about the diminishing role of the state as a central player), other actors (particularly in the most recent scholarship), such as trade unions, rarely take centre stage.

Further, although there is some variety in how ‘actors’ are presented within scholarship, they are almost always conceptualised as bounded groups of individuals and/or organisations that act either in synchrony to reach shared goals/interests (e.g. as in network theories, where state-civil-corporate actors are said to cooperate in non-hierarchical/partnership/autonomous relations) or as competing and self-interested groups of actors situated at different levels within organisational and national structures and across the globe (e.g. as in development theories that often juxtapose state-civil-corporate actors with local-national-global players; or as in corporate governance theories that often present managers/CEOs as embedded in highly hierarchical structures, having conflicting interests to and relations with their employees, boards and governing bodies).

In turn, this means that the many processes that impact on and produce heterogeneity within groups – as well as the mechanisms that influence group formation, boundary drawing and boundary challenges – are rarely explored and problematised. This gap in conceptualisations of the production of heterogeneity within groups of actors has important implications for the ways research on governance activities and techniques is framed and carried out.

2.2.1.2 Activities/practices

The activities placed under the umbrella of ‘governance’ are extremely varied, including policy making, steering, planning, funding, provision, control, decentralisation, representation, cooperation, coordination, participation, integration, etc. Inquiries of the different types of activities are often organised along analytical binaries, most often juxtaposing activities that are seen to be embedded in
hierarchical relations with activities that are said to be rooted in non-hierarchical relations. In this binary structure, at one end – usually at the top of hierarchies and (re)producing them – are the different activities attributed to ‘state(s)’ and global organisations. At the other end – at the bottom of hierarchies, that are thought to be disruptive of and challenging such hierarchies – are the activities of grassroots organisations, individuals, communities, networks, etc.

However, limitations emerge from such approaches: rather than exploring how hierarchies operate and for what purposes they are maintained and reproduced, such binaries often imply that the existence of hierarchies in governance activities and relations are inherently ‘bad’ and so the aim should be to completely diminish and/or change them. Further, oppositional binary frames focus attention on ‘vertical’ struggles within structures and obscure horizontal relationships across structures. Thus, it is often assumed that hierarchies must be disrupted, and that they can only be disrupted, from the bottom up, even though such disruptions often take place incrementally and horizontally, among actors having roughly similar ‘amounts’ of power. Part of the reason for this gap in research is that actors – as alluded to above – are conceptualised as bounded groups and so relations within groups and on the same level are less well explored and understood.

One consequence for governance research has been that – comparatively speaking – there is a much poorer understanding of how those at the ‘top’ comply with existing systems of governance and/or implement practices that challenge established hierarchies in ways that support their own interests. As a result, there is only a limited understanding of how such ‘elites’ control access and create frameworks that limit the numbers of those included in and empowered by ‘networked/cooperative’ governance activities (e.g. de Sousa Santos 2009, 2002, de Sousa Santos and Jenson 2000).

In addition, a strong contradiction can often be identified between the central messages of academic texts on governance activities and their empirical findings: while many texts argue that hierarchical relations are disappearing from governance practices and are being replaced by cooperative and network(ed) relations, the observable realities they describe don’t validate such claims, making clear that these might only be ‘illusions’ imposed on the empirical material by scholars via their choices of theoretical frameworks.

Further, when certain types of activities are framed as constitutive of certain types of governance theories, they are almost always determined by those governance theories in ways that narrow the numbers of variables to be included and analysed. For example, agency and stewardship theories often focus only on relationships between a small number of actors to understand how competing interests of different actors influence practices in organisations, while resource dependence theory

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12 E.g. Bell and Hindmore’s writings (2009) about the resilience of hierarchy and markets through hierarchy.
focuses on binary relations between external resources and their influence on an organisation's structures and behaviours.

Although this allows for a more thorough examination of a delimited number of variables and linked phenomena, it often leads to over simplification, rarely acknowledging the complexity and relevance of other variables and activities. As the complexity of the empirical material is already understated, ‘translation’ problems – that can occur when theories are ‘moved’ across sectors and geographical scales – are either completely overlooked/missed, or misinterpreted. While it can be argued that, out of necessity, empirical research must limit complexity to some degree, to bring it to a level that is possible to manage/analyse, not reflecting on the limitations that emerge from selecting some variables and theories over others, can make findings of such research highly problematic.

Finally, when such ‘simple’ links/connections are uncovered and explained, they easily lend themselves to generalisations and policy impositions that try to determine the ‘best/most efficient’ ways to organise activities and practices in governance, mixing analytical work (what is) with ‘normative’ aspects (what should be) as, for example, in writings that search for ‘good governance’.

2.2.1.3 Techniques/methods

While not a central issue in scholarship a few decades ago, this strand is now extremely wide ranging, forming a significant part of the most recent governance literature: from legal frameworks to steering and regulations; from governance codes of conduct to cultural norms and values; from political technology policies to audits, indicators, assessments and rankings; and from shared and patchwork governance to networked, devolved, and cooperative governance. While past scholarship often assumed that only a few methods – most commonly formalised laws, institutional regulations and steering – were available to governance actors, new studies in this domain bring a series of critical and self-reflective interventions that question and challenge dominant and widespread – but still understudied – techniques through which ‘governance actors’ attempt to change organisations and society.

However, many studies concerned with governance techniques struggle with reconciling the tensions that emerge when everyday realities – the fact that a multiplicity of techniques co-exist even in the smallest of organisations – contradict the theories selected for analysis of such empirical findings. These theories often acknowledge the existence of only one or another technique, or place one technique in a dominant position to the others. This contradiction is reflected well in Sridhar, Khagram and Pang’s (2008) complex and critical work on global health governance. They rightly argue that in the case of health governance it is completely inadequate to talk about a “global ‘architecture’” as the field is characterised by “unstructured plurality”, where “at least seven possible global governance architectures compete for ideological hegemony if not institutional pre-eminence in the contemporary world”
The authors highlight multilateralism, market governance, grassroots globalism, multiple cooperative regionalisms, world state governance, networked governance, and institutional heterarchy as competing global governance techniques. However, perhaps ironically, Sridhar, Khagram and Pang then suggest their own eighth, singular and overarching global model that is based on a series of key principles and values that synthesise selected aspects of the above governance techniques.

Other authors, attempting to overcome such disjunctures between theory and empirical material, suggest focusing on the ways different types of governance techniques are – or can be – combined to create “composite governance regimes” (Benz 2007). Benz argues that hierarchy, networks, competition, and negotiation can be combined into a framework that helps explore existing governance regimes. According to Benz, uncovering the dynamic processes underlying governance allows scholars to focus on rule systems, mechanisms of collective action, and coordination between arenas. Wittek, in turn, suggests the creation of complex ideal-typical models that are embedded in sociological paradigms and are tested and refined in a real-world, practical setting. He uses his own framework to explain high productivity in science in the Netherlands (2007). Ng and Ruger, writing about governance and health, argue that scholars should take a step back to see that the debate ought not place so much emphasis on ever-changing ‘techniques’, but rather on the ways different issues are framed and the implications they have for governance, policy, and the sector: “Health policy will differ depending on whether health is framed as a matter of security and foreign policy, human rights, or a global public good. These frames are not mutually exclusive, but do have distinct implications.” (2014:7)

When there are no particular sets of theories linked to a governance technique it is often ‘fashionable’ trends that guide selection and framings of the empirical material. For example, for a time, new public management as a governance technique was said to be spreading everywhere. At one point it was becoming so ubiquitous that it was turned into a theory in its own right. That theory would then become policy that continued to proliferate across sectors through implementation and/or imposition. Such interventions and the research built around them, in turn, became significant contributing factors that overshadowed more open-ended inquiries into what occurs in different sectors and across geographical scales.

Another ‘buzzword’ that seems to be currently emerging in relation to techniques and methods is governance ‘innovations’. As is typical in such cases, many so-called innovations exist solely in the vocabulary and terminology used by scholars, not on-the-ground and as empirical governance innovations. For example, when studies

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13 In part, this is a problematique that emerges from the broader expectations imposed on social science and scientists, where all research must prove to be ‘novel’ - as ‘novelty’ is the expected prime contribution of research. Then, one way of claiming novelty is by picking up new developments or catch phrases that are gaining popularity in policy and practice. Another way is by re-framing and re-labelling old phenomena and theories. These two approaches can be and are often combined.
make reference to the new global and local divisions that emerge between ‘vertical governance funds’ (e.g. the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that has narrowly defined goals and does not engage in strengthening national systems) and ‘horizontal governance funds’ (e.g. the World Health Organisation that has broad goals and also has an interest in strengthening national systems), it is difficult if not impossible to pinpoint or define how such developments are new or innovative beyond the non-traditional use of terminology. ‘Risk management’, also representing a change in terminology more than a true innovation in governance practices, has now also become ubiquitous across disciplines, sectors, and geographical scales.

Some of these innovations, however, such as the ‘creative commons’ – rooted in practices of transnational epistemic communities and social movements and supported by the global spread of the internet – do create new channels of communication and new collaborative practices. In contrast to many other governance techniques that stall at the level of terminology, these new channels result in acknowledging, incorporating and implementing values and social norms that become central to debate and result in innovations to regulation, national legislation and global practices (Dobusch and Quack 2016). Further, it also needs to be noted that, for example, ‘principle-agent theory’ and ‘new public management’ – ‘innovations’ at their time – did change ‘governance’ ideationally as well as practicably, with important consequences for governments and other actors, as well as consequences for coordination across society.

But the most intriguing aspect of this most recent wave of excitement around ‘governance innovation(s)’ is the fact that ‘innovation’ has completely replaced all meaningful discourse and research about ‘change’. Thus, ‘change’ – unless it is understood to be synonymous/interchangeable with ‘innovation’ – is almost never conceptualised in governance research, thereby drawing needed attention away from incremental and long-term processes and mechanisms that (re)produce established relations of dominance, exploitation, exclusion and inequalities.

2.2.1.4 Scope

As referenced earlier in this review, the scope of governance, as delineated in the scholarship, is (or should) always encompass the ability to reach/achieve field-specific, practice-oriented goals. For example: setting direction; exercising power and authority; strengthening democratic systems; instituting good, equitable and sound systems; resolving conflicts; achieving and maintaining economic sustainability and long-term financial viability; safeguarding assets; achieving organisational and institutional change; empowering communities; steering health and education systems; promoting fairness, transparency and accountability; managing risk; providing public goods; protecting stakeholder interests; improving efficiency and productivity; getting value for money; capacity building; creating order
and legitimacy; course correction in response to unanticipated events; curbing executive excesses; preventing future institutional, systemic and moral failures, etc.

This list sheds light on an essential characteristic of governance scholarship, namely that governance always ‘exists’, ‘takes place’, ‘is done’ etc. for particular reasons and with particular aims in mind, and/or reflects some overarching ‘architecture’ that highlights its political nature and the fact that it is the result of purposeful actions taken by thoughtful actors. That is to say that the ‘scope of governance’ is almost always embedded in the definition of governance and, when that scope is missing, the definition is invariably open to being criticised as incomplete. As Ansell and Torfing put it in the closing chapter of their handbook on governance, “governance theories tend to be process-oriented and context-sensitive” and are “linked with practical efforts at solving complex problems in new and creative ways” (2016: 554).

Further, more often than not, no matter a particular definition, the scope of governance is frequently expressed in a language of values that have been defined and/or reinterpreted by those who had no direct part in shaping the scholarship – often by state actors, and/or organisations such as OECD, World Bank, UN, UNESCO, EU, and by institutional managers, epistemic communities, etc. As Djelick and Quack argue, “Transnational communities generate and foster the development of practices, standards and different kinds of ‘soft law’. In parallel they also have to engage in justification and legitimacy building – showing how these practices, standards, and rules are useful and implementable but also arguing that they are superior to existing or possible alternatives” (2010: 405-406). Based on this, and if we accept the distinction made by Bevir that governance exists as both practice and theory (2016: 1), it can be argued that setting the scope of governance is almost always the result of ‘practice’ while ‘theory’ tries to make sense of it, justify it, and incorporate it into existing or new theoretical frameworks. Thus, ‘scope’ is almost never defined as emerging from the internal logic of a ‘theory’ and in that respect scholarship is rarely ‘trend-setting’, but rather follows in the steps of politics and policy making.

Part of the explanation might be that, for a long time, many disciplines that focused on governance – with the possible exception of anthropology and sociology – were partially bound by an interpretation of ‘scientific objectivity’ that deemed values inquiries to be outside the scope of theory building, and as a result ‘values’ could/should not be reflected or acknowledged in theoretical frameworks. Thus, when they emerged from empirical findings and/or were imposed as normative requests from practitioners – which they frequently did – they were isolated as ‘cultural variables’ or said to be reflective of ‘practices’ and needed to be distilled and synthesised into ‘objective’ analytical-theoretical frames from which morality, values, and ethics had to be excluded. While this trend is clearly changing in some of the most recent literature, as research on norms and values has begun to take a more important role in governance scholarship, when examining the entire body of scholarship, it still remains near the margins.
In addition, as Graaf and Williams argue in their work on global finance, even though “integrating social values and reflectivity into capital market regulation” is critical (2011: 409), ironically, solutions can only be successful if they translate social values into the language of accounting: “So, for example, when companies invest in training their employees, that investment should be treated as a capital investment, not as a cost. When companies use water, produce greenhouse gas emissions or other pollution, or undermine habitats, those should be treated as costs.” (2011: 410) According to the authors, although it is ironic to suggest that “social concerns and values be incorporated into the capital markets in significant part through the reductionist language of numbers”, these changes are needed, as “market regulation should no longer be conceptualised to serve the rational self-interest of individuals, but should help individuals – all within their own limited responsibility – to make the best decisions together, decisions that serve the common interest.” (2011: 411). Or, as Ansell and Torfing worded this problematique in their work on governance theories, “governance is often freighted with conflicting normative expectations that can be hard to realize in practice” (2016: 554).

2.2.1.5 Values

As referenced above, scope and values are frequently linked as inter-dependent, and the scope of governance is often defined as finding and/or determining the means by which actors – usually practitioners, not scholars – can achieve the ‘values’ they put forward. For example:

- The scope of governance is “promoting responsibility, fairness, transparency and accountability” (World Bank, Atacik and Jarvis 2006).  

- “In general, governance issues pertain to the ability of government to develop an efficient, effective, and accountable public management process” that is open to citizen participation and that strengthens rather than weakens a democratic system of government. (USAID, Office of Democracy & Governance 1998)  

- Governance “is concerned with concepts of democracy and the rule of law” where “democracy is a “universal value” based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and full participation in all aspects of their lives” (UNDP 2012: 3-5)  

- Many global health practitioners argue that shared ethical commitments and values must be developed to be able to develop shared global health governance (e.g. Ruger 2012, 2013, Mcinnes and Lee 2012).  

- In corporate governance, many professionals argue that integrating social values and reflectivity into capital market regulation and embedding them in organisational values should become the cornerstone of corporate social

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responsibility (e.g. Crane and Matten 2007, Allouche 2006, Mullerat 2005, Mccarthy et al. 2017).

However, as noted above, while ‘values’ were initially central to practitioners as the core building blocks of their definitions of governance, recent scholarship has placed greater emphasis on inquiries aimed at identifying and interpreting values that underlie governance. For example:

- Robichau argues that “the paradox of governance is resolving what is with what should be. Conceivably, we as scholars fall short by examining governance from a perspective of finite processes and structures of governing, managing, leading, and representing, rather than from a holistic approach emphasizing democratic ideals and practices at every meaningful opportunity.” (2011: 126)
- Eckert, Behrends and Dafinger argue that governance is to be understood as “the administration of access to and provision of rights, services and goods that imply also the definition of categories of inclusion and entitlements that are explicit or implicit in governmental practices” (2008).
- Burris argues that “much of what is meant by governance has to do with manipulating the elements of governance to achieve effective and efficient management – i.e., governance that works… Good governance is not merely about governability or management, however. It also implies goals towards which systems are being directed, and so governance as a process is inextricably linked to normative questions of what the governor is seeking to accomplish” (2008: 9-11). “The challenge, after all, is not to adapt to a changing social and physical environment, but to adapt rationally and fairly” (2008:66).

Bevir, in his introduction to the SAGE Handbook of Governance, argues that governance cannot be understood – especially not over time – unless one considers the dynamics that move the field, namely that governance is ‘practice’, ‘theory’ and ‘dilemma’, all at the same time: “Governance refers to various new theories and practices of governing and the dilemmas to which they give rise… The practices create dilemmas and encourage attempts to comprehend them in theoretical terms. The dilemmas require new theoretical reflection and practical activity if they are to be adequately addressed.” (2011: 1) If, for the moment, we accept Bevir’s argument relating to the dynamics that move the field, it becomes easier to see that the scholarship is at a stage where attempts are made to understand the dilemmas raised by the ways ‘value’ and ‘values’ are being implemented in ‘practice’. In turn, scholars must work out how such dilemmas can be operationalised and incorporated in empirical research and theory formation. It is no surprise then, that a great many studies that focus on ‘values’ seem to be primarily preoccupied with finding and asking the ‘right’ questions, some of which – according to scholars – are:

• Where does power, authority, and legitimacy lie in the new forms/modes of governance? How is it achieved and shared? How do different forms, models, templates, and practices impact on everyday work, life, social forms, and organising?

• What are the links between practices of governance and their outcomes on work, when efficiency, sustainability, transparency, accountability, predictability, fairness, responsibility, autonomy, freedom, safety, sustainability, cultural pluralism, sovereignty, representation are all seen as core values of governance? In turn, how can protest, negotiation, compliance, and resistance be conceptualised and acknowledged in such models?

• What role do norms, ethical-moral issues, and trust play in governance?

• How can the ‘public good/private good’ binary be conceptualised for the purposes of governance?

• How can and/or should the ‘public good/private good’ dichotomy be deconstructed and re-conceptualised, given that some scholars argue (Bear and Mathur 2015) that ‘technologies of governance’ traditionally used by (state) bureaucracies (e.g. transparency, accountability, fiscal discipline, decentralization, etc.) are being defined and presented as ‘public goods’ by powerful actors in an effort to shift the debate on ‘public goods’ in order to restructure and change governance to serve their own interests?

• Whose interests are being protected by governance and whose values promoted?

While ‘inroads’ into the ‘practitioner territory’ of ‘values’ are welcome in scholarship, some important contradictions, most likely the result of the limited history of research on values in governance, still strongly define this stream of scholarship. Most importantly, values are often not focused upon in ways that allow for a full and open exploration of the ways they impact on actions and processes across the field. Rather, they appear as normative values – what ought to guide actions and processes in governance – and then great efforts are made to bring governance into line with such ideal-typical guidelines.

This approach raises the ‘democracy problem’ (a term emerging from this review) that works as follows: an undefined link is established between governance and democracy in which democracy is implicitly understood to be a set of governance frameworks that characterise established practices in/of Western/developed countries. It is claimed to be essential and it is implied that governance should/would not exist unless it is democratic and/or if it strengthens democratic processes. Policies are, then, developed to ‘fix’ and/or strengthen such aspects of governance. This approach is so widely accepted that even the Epilogue to the Handbook of Theories of Governance argues that future research “need[s] to investigate the potential for new forms of governance to deepen democracy and further explore the meaning of democracy in the context of governance.” (Ansell and Torfing 2016: 558) This approach raises several questions, some of which are being addressed by scholarship as well:
• Why is the concept of democracy taken for granted and imposed normatively instead of being analysed critically, e.g. examining variations of democracy, and whether it is possible that ‘democracy’ is used as a tool to legitimate domination? If so, how does this legitimation happen on the ground and in everyday interactions?
• Does this imply that governance cannot exist and/or be researched under autocratic/totalitarian systems?
• How can governance be researched at the global level when ‘democratic’ and ‘non-democratic’ states and organisations interact and possibly cooperate (as in global conflict resolution, global environmental and health emergencies, global humanitarian crisis, etc.)?
• How can governance be researched within loosely connected systems of organisation – said to be anarchic or have anarchic roots – such as the Occupy movement, or other social movements that rely on grassroots mobilisation and challenge established/mainstream forms of ‘democratic’ governance?

Further, on the surface it is often claimed or assumed that inquiries into values are conducted to uncover and highlight a plurality of views and processes in governance. However, linking governance and democracy frames ‘democracy’ as essential to governance, either because it already exists or because it needs to be instituted by ‘democratizing forces.’ This, in turn, does not allow for an open-ended exploration of values that are linked to or underlie governance, and so inquiries often result in reproducing and legitimising established practices of dominance as well as misinterpreting and/or silencing struggles for power across scales, geographical regions and over time.

2.2.1.6 Outcomes

Just as many texts do not draw sharp distinctions between scope and values, many also do not distinguish clearly between scope and outcomes. For example, all of the following are discussed in scholarship as if scope and outcomes are interchangeable or complementary terms: strengthening democratic systems; resolving conflicts; achieving economic sustainability; achieving organisational and institutional change; empowering communities; providing public goods; improving efficiency and productivity; capacity building; creating order and legitimacy; course correction in response to unanticipated events; curbing executive excesses; preventing future institutional, systemic and moral failures.

While it is a recurring issue throughout governance scholarship, and thus impacts all six domains, it is most important to emphasise here the need for making a clear distinction between ideal-typical models and empirical findings: in this case, the frameworks that draw out what should be the outcomes of governance versus the empirically observable outcomes of governance. The reason for this distinction is that, unless these two dimensions are kept methodologically separate, it becomes
impossible to uncover and understand underlying mechanisms that shape governance-related phenomena. Without that understanding it is equally impossible to design informed and workable policies.

However, the scholarship frequently does not succeed in clearly distinguishing ideal-typical models from findings of empirical research, thereby corrupting data and yielding to

pressures to identify and promote adherence to ‘best’ practices – a core set of governance processes and systems that apply, with minor modifications, to all organizations... buttressed by reviews by panels of experts (...), a substantial and growing governance consulting industry, ‘associational entrepreneurs’, such as non-profit associations and self-declared third party watchdogs, and by state regulators which have begun to identify standards of ‘hallmarks’ of good governance (Harrow and Phillips 2013: 15).

Part of the problem might be inherent in the theoretical frameworks of governance. As these frameworks evolved, they frequently reproduced this contradiction, without seeing it as problematic and highlighting it as a positive characteristic of the governance field. De Sousa Santos criticises the field along these lines, asserting that the causes for the lack of such distinctions and clarity are that governance has become a matrix that is “both an embedding or grounding structure and a generative environment for an interconnected network of pragmatic ideas and cooperative patterns of behaviour” (2009: 1)\textsuperscript{18}. So salient is this in the field of governance that it is even explained and justified in the introduction to the Handbook on Theories of Governance, where the authors argue that “theories have different purposes” and so they can both analyse governance outcomes and help “to improve governance to secure desirable outcomes” (Ansell and Torfing 2016: 1).

Finally, it is usually a discussion of outcomes that prompts claims to compare different sectors, arguing that they shouldn’t be perceived as being hermetically sealed (Rabe 2013). While Rabe is right in principle, the problems with such comparisons are exactly that: they are prompted by looking at ‘outcomes’ and promoting ‘best practice’ models, and rarely by an interest in the underlying processes that play out in different arenas to produce a variety of ‘outcomes’. For example, it is often argued that education governance and health governance can and should be compared. However, they are often compared based on outcomes and related indicators, for example, establishing the correct balance between lay and professional board members to assure the most effective operation of an institution and systems.

Occasionally, such findings might shed light on some systemic characteristics that can contribute to the better working of boards, but they can be counterproductive in at least two important ways: First, there are often a myriad of large and small

\textsuperscript{18} http://www.ces.uc.pt/publicacoes/annualreview/ficheiros/000/895_BSSantos_RCCS72.pdf

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variables (and outcomes) that must be compared to be able to isolate those that have had an impact. Most of the time, this is impossible and/or cannot be thoroughly evaluated. Second, outcomes are often explained without all underlying processes being explored and identified. Returning to the above example, the effective operation of a board may have little or nothing to do with the balance of lay and professional members and more to do with the actions of different arms of the ‘state’ or other powerbrokers in the field. These processes can be productively used as linkages that allow for the comparison of sectors, not the specific outcomes of those processes (i.e. the number of lay members on boards).

3. Space, time, scale, power

The above discussion of the six domains makes clear that analytical comparisons across fields, sectors and disciplines can become highly problematic, unless such comparisons take into consideration and attempt to correct for the limitations in scholarship explored above. In its concluding remarks, this review will suggest some possible new approaches that account for such shortcomings. But first, an additional analytical step is necessary owing to the fact that present governance scholarship frequently explores the six domains across time and space, and in relation to power and scale.

Problems arise as a significant part of governance scholarship uses ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘power’ and ‘scale’ as ‘externalities’. That is to say, not as produced by and through social interactions. Consequently, they are treated as static and fixed and therefore, rather than being unbundled, can simply and uncritically be deployed in relation to other variables and processes. In addition, much present scholarship also sees ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘power’ and ‘scale’ as being more or less similar to each other. This review argues that they can neither be treated as ‘externalities’ nor should they be perceived as similar to each other.

As physics, (chrono) geography, anthropology, and other disciplines argue, the abstract categories of ‘time’ and ‘space’ – under certain conditions and unlike other abstract dimensions – can be seen as an ‘external’ “non-human timespace phenomen[al]” that exist independently from human/social interactions (Bear 2014: 15, based on Gell 1996). While the existence of this stream of research is important and asserts ‘time’ and ‘space’ as fundamentally different from ‘scale’ and ‘power’, for the purposes of this review these inquiries are less relevant and so will not be discussed further here.

Nevertheless, it is the case that both time and space can be socially produced as well, and thus can be explored in research as subjective experiences of the world (Bear 2014, Gell 1996, Massey 1992). Regarding ‘time’, Gell, “the only anthropologist who has given us an example on how to construct an explicit epistemology of time” (Bear 2014: 15), created an ideal-type framework that distinguishes between three forms of time: social framings (representations),
personal experiences, and the more abstract, “non-human timespace phenomenon”. As Bear explains,

[TEchnologies of time such as navigational devices will be closely tied to non-human forces. Historical records and personal mementos, by contrast, can improvise freely with both the flux of life and experiences of before and after, largely unconstrained by non-human time. Environmental plans, meanwhile, attempt to project and combine human and non-human forms of time, whereas economic models make social time-maps of other social time-maps that bear little relation to human or non-human time. (2014: 16)

Similarly, space has these multiple qualities, as explained by Massey:

There has, as is often now recounted, been a long history of understanding space as ‘the dead, the fixed’ in Foucault’s famous retrospection. More recently and in total contrast there has been a veritable extravaganza of non-Euclidean, black holey, Riemannian… and a variety of other previously topologically improbable evocations. Somewhere between these two lie the arguments (...) about ordinary space; the space and places through which, in the negotiation of relations within multiplicities, the social is constructed. (2005: 13)

As Massey points out, there is a reoccurring fallacy – both in everyday perceptions and the sciences – which asserts that time and space are oppositional. Consequently, it is often (mistakenly) assumed that space can be “annihilated by time” (Massey 2005: 90). One vernacular representation of this is the argument that new technologies – planes, high-speed trains, telecommunication devices, etc. – led to space being ‘compressed’ (as in long-distance flying or calls and chats using WhatsApp), or even eliminated in some instances, such as in real-time, temporally simultaneous global financial trading and transactions.

However, as Massey argues, while it is true that important technological discoveries have been responsible for many changes in the ways we experience space and time this does not mean that space has disappeared, but instead that “there is more ‘space’ in our lives, and it takes less time” (2005: 90). Ironically, Massey continues, “what is actually being reduced here is time, and what is being expanded (in the sense of the formation of social relations/interaction, including those of transport and communication) is space (as distance)” (2005: 91). But, argues Massey, distance is only one aspect of space, another fundamental is ‘multiplicity’ – the possibility of simultaneity, of multiple open-ended configurations that also allow for the coexistence of a multiplicity of possible futures. And, once this is recognised and enters the ‘political’ realm, some of the current mainstream narratives – for example, that of globalisation – will have to change and allow for this multiplicity to manifest in mainstream understandings, as current narratives of globalisation are “provoked by
what is happening to the West” and – in some measure – “founded upon a Western anxiety” (2005: 88).

For the purposes of this review, one important consequence of such distinctions is that they help bring to light ways in which such ambiguities in understandings of space and time obscure processes of transformation and change (as in ‘globalisation’), or obscure links between the simultaneous coexistence of the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’ in their ‘embodied’ forms (i.e. ‘contained’ within a human being). For example, and this has relevance for research on governance, violence and the resulting fear it can generate, they are among the most intimate of human feelings. However, they can – simultaneously – have strong links to ‘state’ and ‘global’ structures and their power-invested configurations, even if such links and processes are only rarely explored and revealed in/by (governance) scholarship.

It is argued that ‘scale’ and ‘power’, in contrast to ‘time’ and ‘space’, are always socially ‘produced’ (e.g. as in works of Santos, Massey, Bourdieu, Wacquant) and so their understandings are always dependent upon negotiated ‘structures of interpretation’, both in everyday human interactions and in the sciences. This is the case even when – under certain conditions – the ‘diffusion of power’ (Guzzini 2012) is argued to result in ‘power’ being ‘everywhere’: that is, becoming ‘embodied’ and thus ‘materialised’ in and through human bodies and actions (e.g. Foucault’s governmentality) or ‘translated’ into social ‘structures’ and thus ‘externalised’ and ‘materialised’, such as – for example – in ‘state bureaucracies’ (e.g. Susan Strange’s arguments about the ‘power of structures’ that can persist and so ‘exist’ independently from immediate social interactions)\(^{19}\).

Regarding ‘scale’, Brenner argues, “traditional Euclidian, Cartesian and Westphalian notions of geographical scale as a fixed, bounded, self-enclosed and pregiven container are currently being superseded… by a highly productive emphasis on process, evolution, dynamism and sociopolitical contestation” (2001: 592). However, according to Auge, while the sociopolitical is important, without the ‘economic’ one cannot understand the “change of scale now affecting life on the planet” (2014: 47). He argues that, fundamentally, the ‘change of scale’ is economic and “driven by technological development”, whereas capitalism succeeded in creating a market that extends across the whole earth. Thus, on the one hand, “the planet is being urbanized, equipped and reorganized” based on that market logic. On the other hand, the body itself is being “kitted out, drugged and doped with increasing efficiency”, leading to the paradox where this “triumphant” body is “no longer anyone’s body: it escapes the control of its putative owner; it is the captive of the techniques or substances that propel it beyond any normal performance” (2014: 48). Nevertheless, Augue contends, we can also trace a profound ‘change of scale’ in the

\(^{19}\) It is not the purpose of this review to offer a detailed discussion of power; for those interested, two good books that discuss these issues more broadly/comprehensively are Mark Haugaard’s work (2011, 2012, 2013, 2015) and Steven Lukes’ *Power: A Radical View* (1974, 2005). For discussions of power in relation to governance, see for example Guzzini (1993, 2005, 2013), Haugaard (2013, 2016), Jessop (1972, 1990, 1997, 2002, 2007), and Eagleton-Pierce (2016).
political (e.g. the constructed binary of local conflicts versus international/'global' trends), the ecological (e.g. mistreating the planet), the social (e.g. the growing gap between rich and poor, along with the growth of a “transnational planetary oligarchy and an unequal planetary society”), the demographic (e.g. increase in population and fear of being “too many”, and by extension, fear of migration), the cultural (e.g. links to and among cities on a global scale, rather than to countries, where cities compete to construct their own ‘brand images’), and the physical and metaphysical (e.g. as ancient cosmologies are challenged, doubts and fears become individualised and internalised, while the “confused intimation of a perpetually expanding material universe of infinite size” exceeds “our ability to imagine it”) (2014: 47-57).

One of the issues these clarifications on ‘power’ and ‘scale’ raise for governance studies is that more careful conceptualisations of and nuanced research on ‘power’ and ‘scale(s)’ in relation to governance are needed, along with movement away from understandings that assert experiences of ‘local’, ‘national’, and ‘global’ governance as fixed and homogenous, and power relations as uniform across and also within ‘scales’. Thus, even though governance scholarship only rarely problematises these analytical dimensions and on most occasions simply uses them as additional fixed/static variables, it is necessary to incorporate the above distinctions into Figure I. Figure II attempts to visually address this dilemma.

Figure II. Time, space, scale and power and their relation to ‘governance’

Once the six domains and their relationships to time, space, power and scale crystallised, it became clear that the approach taken in this literature review might well bring to light some analytical paradoxes that have taken deep root in ‘governance’ scholarship and are only rarely (if ever) addressed. Thus, at this stage, Doreen Massey’s question, “In what sense are ‘regional’ problems regional problems?” (1979), might well be paraphrased to ask, ‘In what sense are
‘governance’ problems governance problems?’ The next section concerns itself with exploring these analytical conundrums.

3.1 ‘Governance’ and (some of) its analytical paradoxes

As most studies focus on the emerging problematiques and contradictions within ‘governance’ from a definitional point of view, many also assert that – once such definitional problems are ‘cleared’ – research on ‘governance’ can continue as before. In contrast, this literature review argues that the field is not simply facing a definitional conundrum/puzzle, about which much has already been written (e.g. Offe 2009, Eagleton-Pierce 2014, Hofferberth 2014, Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, Santos 2009, Jessop 1997, 1998, 2004). Instead, there is reason to think that there is a deep-seated analytical/structural problem in many approaches to governance (which, in turn, leads to definitional issues, but not the other way around).

The reason this review argues that the issues that have emerged are analytical rather than definitional is that understandings of ‘governance’ seem to emerge not as the result of empirical inquiries, but rather as a set of conceptualisations that are superimposed from a predetermined category – that of ‘governance’. Put differently, most studies a priori assume the existence of ‘governance’, and examine all ‘governance issues’ from that starting point. This results in governance becoming both the object and tool of analysis – explanandum and explanans. That is to say, many scholars miss a critical step if they begin by assuming that governance ‘exists’ – at different levels/scales and across regions – and is just waiting to be ‘found’, identified, described, explained, and understood. Everything (or perhaps more accurately, the only things) to be discovered and understood from that point forward are dependent on what is and isn’t included under the heading of ‘governance’. As a result, these inquiries become limited by increasing numbers of built-in assumptions about what ‘governance’ research should be looking for. At the very least, this approach leads to four analytical paradoxes (likely, many others can and should be identified):

3.1.1 Governance and its ‘closures’

It is no wonder, then, that such an approach often ‘creates’ rather than explores reality. That is to say, a framework which begins by assuming the ‘existence’ of some broader system, structure and/or process to which the term ‘governance’ is assigned, leads scholars to ‘see’ connections, assume order and coordination, find processes and mechanisms, and impose structures where no linkages actually exist. If and when such ‘linkages’ are ‘found’, there is no basis upon which to question whether they might or should be attributed to other social processes and not to some central or coordinated web of relationships that were pre-determined to be

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20 Webster: That which needs to be explained (explanandum) and that which contains the explanation (explanans).
'governance'. By extension, this also means that once a certain form of organisation of social life ('governance') is assumed to exist as an objective (external) reality, many other possible alternatives – the multiple open-ended configurations that allow for the coexistence of a multiplicity of possible futures, as described by Massey – are left unexplored and unimagined, that is, 'closed down'. And, as Wacquant argues in one of his articles about racial domination, when such a paradox emerges, one should “reaffirm Durkheim's first rule of sociological method – the need to break with preconceptions” (1997: 224).21

3.1.2 Governance and its ‘silences’

Following from the above, such an approach produces/creates a series of ‘silences’ – things that are missed, ignored, obscured because they are not included in the pre-determined ‘imaginings’ of ‘governance’. That is to say, they are not studied, are understudied, and/or studied based on poorly formulated questions and in misunderstood and misinterpreted relationships. One case in point for such ‘structural selectivity’ is when governance is understood to be ‘order/coordination/networks’. The analytical frames that are developed from this understanding make invisible all that falls outside of ‘coordinated/networked’ action and ‘consensual/horizontal’ relations. Davis (2011), for example, highlights how a priori assumptions about ‘networked governance’ often allow only for horizontal and consensual relations to be acknowledged in research, thereby masking the continued existence of hierarchical relations and dominance within and across networks.

However, to best highlight this paradox, it is worth returning to and building upon the discussion occasioned by Figures I and II. As noted, although the six domains emerged as the structure or armature around which the field is built and which – separately or in a variety of constellations – ‘produce’ governance, this literature review does not see them as having ‘equal’ analytical power or a directly correlative relationship with the central ‘relational field’, where governance is seen to be ‘located’ or ‘produced’. Thus, the simplest way to understand how ‘governance’ slips so easily into becoming both object and tool of analysis, is to focus on one of the six domains – ‘outcomes’ for example.

In analytical terms, ‘outcomes’ cannot define and produce ‘governance’ because – per definitionem – they are the ‘result’ of the processes/structures/things called ‘governance’. Nevertheless, a significant part of governance scholarship (more in some disciplines than others) frequently inverts cause and causality when it defines ‘governance’ based on policy ‘outcomes’. The assumptions and models that emerge from conceptualisations of ‘democratic’ and ‘good governance’ are a case in point. Such models, either implicitly or explicitly, assume the existence of a ‘scale’ on which different types of governance can be placed, ranging from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ or ‘no

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21 http://loicwacquant.net/assets/Papers/ANALYTICRACIALDOMINAT0.pdf
governance at all’. This last, most extreme case, is conceptualised by scholarship in terms of ‘failed states’. And, while such approaches are presented as being ‘objective’ and based on an examination of a series of ‘independent’ variables, they all have strong ‘moral’ and ideological underpinnings, rooted in western economic and political definitions of ‘democracy’ and ‘good governance’.

However, as alluded to earlier in the text – where the six domains and the ‘democracy problem’ were discussed in more detail – such (moralised) frameworks rarely end with ‘scholarly’ descriptions of the word. Instead, they are often used to hide and/or mask – that is silence – long entrenched and new forms of domination and hierarchies.

*Figure III* points to this analytical paradox.

*Figure III. The ‘outcomes’ paradox*

Based on the above, it is easier to see that when ‘democratic’ and ‘(good) governance’ are deployed as analytical tools by scholars in different contexts and across different regions of the globe, the term’s political functions and uses are consistently underplayed and/or completely silenced. That is, the colonising inroads that are built on top of the concept – from one thematic field to another, and from one region to another – are marginalised and/or completely obscured.

Some good examples are those where governance techniques are ‘transferred’ from the corporate to the non-profit and public sectors ostensibly to increase ‘efficiency’, ‘transparency’ and/or ‘accountability’. Or, where ‘good governance’ practices and models are ‘borrowed’ from the Anglo-Saxon/western/developed world to be applied
in the developing world, under the guise of increasing ‘sustainability’, ‘fairness’, ‘pluralism, or ‘autonomy’. Such approaches, although claiming to analyse realities on the ground from comparative perspectives, instead set ideal-typical reference points that are – almost always – constructed along interpretations, practices, and processes defined and controlled by actors from western societies, including scholars and practitioners.

Owing to the tendency for these analytical explorations to frequently conclude that there are gaps in (local) governance when compared to the (ideal-typical) ‘democratic’ and ‘good governance’ models, it becomes easier to legitimise prescriptive and transformative practices advocated and imposed by – for example – local, (political) entrepreneurs and global organisations. However, as Wacquant argues in his piece on racial domination, such frameworks don’t explore, but instead ‘judge’ the actors and processes on the ground, confirming and reaffirming the superiority and “goodness of the investigator (and readers)”. “The problem is”, Wacquant continues, “that such atonement does little to help us get closer to the phenomenon at hand and penetrate its makeup, quite the contrary” (1997: 225).

3.1.3 Over ‘theorisation’

Analytical problems and inconsistences lead to ‘over theorisation’, a situation where – to deal with a reality that is perceived as overly complex – all phenomena discovered, or imagined as ideal-typical, are incorporated into theories, causing the number of theories to grow exponentially. For example, activities (Development Theory, Planning Theory, Collective Action Theory), techniques (Public Management Theory, Information-based Theory, Regulatory Theory, Collaborative Governance, Networked Governance), actors (Stakeholder Theory, Agency Theory, State Theory, Organisation Theory), values (Democratic Theory, Empirical Democratic Theory, Democratic Network Governance, Normative Theory), and outcomes and scope (Public Participation, Accountability, Complexity Theory, Risk Governance, Metagovernance, Transnational Governance, Global Governance).

At this stage of proliferation, theories start to exist for their own sake. They become little more than scientific discourse – perhaps better described as an echo chamber or a feedback loop – wherein scholars endlessly reproduce theoretical models that have diminishing relevance and connections to real-life events and processes.

Another problem with ‘over theorisation’ in governance scholarship is that ‘outcomes’ often become the drivers of theory building, and – as a result – a proliferating number of theories start to reproduce the problems discussed earlier in this review.

22 There is vast literature on ‘good governance’, both critical and supportive of the practice, so it seems almost arbitrary to pick one or another text. However, some examples: Rothstein 2012, Wei Zhang 2016, Ben 2011, Brian 2007, Devaney 2016, Thornton and Fleming 2011, Helliwell et al. 2014, Reif 2004, Welsh and Woods 2004.
23 See the discussion of the ‘Outcomes’ domain, from page 26 onwards.
Namely, that when it comes to research and analysis, there are often no clear
distinctions drawn between ideal-typical models and empirical findings. The result is
that when focus shifts to outcomes – understood here as the finite results of
processes – they are ‘frozen’ into atemporal and aspatial theories that become less
and less relevant and produce ineffective or, worse, counterproductive policies. The
result is that the underlying – and understudied – processes continue to produce
problems and new patterns of dominance.

Clearly, one could argue, researchers need to move beyond/get past this
discursive/narrative sphere, and start examining the empirical evidence these texts
provide about institutions, spaces, actors, and relationships. Having moved beyond
the discursive/narrative sphere, researchers would have the intellectual space to
assert that it is pointless or – at the very least – non-productive to become wedded to
specific/particular analytical categories and instead draw out and explore the
possibilities of parallels between findings, across fields, and proceed with their
research (e.g. compare healthcare governance with education governance; or global
governance through local governance). There is, however, a caveat: As explained
earlier in this review\(^{24}\), once a comparative framework is put in place, variables,
analytical frameworks and the relationships that exist among them need to be
clarified (Dale and Robertson 2016, 2013, 2009). Unless this is done, researchers
run the risk of not recognising the ‘processes’ that produce similar and/or diverging
patterns across fields, comparing instead one outcome with another, or one scientific
narrative/discursive construct with other such constructs.

3.1.4 Governance, ‘reification’ and the ‘demarcation problem’

Brubaker and Cooper, in their article titled *Beyond “Identity”*, argue that

[m]any key terms in the interpretative social sciences and history – “race”,
“nation”, “ethnicity”, “citizenship”, “democracy”, “class”, “community”, and
“tradition”, for example – are at once categories of social and political analysis.
(2000: 4)

By ‘categories of practice’ Brubaker and Cooper mean the “categories of everyday
social experience, developed by ordinary social actors” that are different from “the
experience-distant categories used by social analysts” (2000: 4). According to the
two authors, ‘categories of practice’ (i.e. vernacular and political understandings) are
often conflated with ‘categories of analysis’ (scholarly analytical frameworks). That,
in turn, leads to “close reciprocal connection and mutual influence among their
practical and analytical uses”. However, they continue, the fact that certain concepts
(e.g. nation, race, identity) are used as categories of practice, and have great
influence on the social and political, does not mean that researchers should use
them as analytical categories to understand such phenomena. That is,

\(^{24}\) Again, see the discussion of the ‘Outcomes’ domain, from page 26 onwards.
just as one can analyse “nation-talk” and nationalist politics without positing the existence of “nations”, or “race-talk” and “race”-oriented politics without positing the existence of “races”, so one can analyse “identity-talk” and identity politics without, as analysts, positing the existence of “identities”. Reification is a social process, not only an intellectual practice. As such, it is central to the politics of “ethnicity”, “race”, “nation”, and other putative “identities”. Analysts of this kind of politics should seek to account for this process of reification. We should seek to explain the processes and mechanisms through which what has been called the “political fiction” of the “nation” – or of the “ethnic group”, “race”, or other putative “identity” – can crystallize, at certain moments, as a powerful, compelling reality. But we should avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis. (2000: 5)

Wacquant argues along similar lines in his discussion of racial domination, but he goes even further when he points out that in using “race” as an analytical category social scientists have not only accepted a preconstructed object; they have also elevated one particular national preconstruction of ‘race’, that evolved by the United States in the twentieth century, as the basic yardstick by which to measure all instances of ethnoracial subordination and inequality. (1997: 223)

Exploring the relevance of these arguments to governance, and building on the analytical clarifications made earlier in this review, it is easier to see that such demarcation problems and reification of categories, as well as cultural bias, often remain unaddressed in governance scholarship. That is, conflating the vernacular with the analytical and using preconstructed and western-biased models of ‘governance’ are fallacies found across a significant part of the scholarship, regardless of thematic fields or disciplinary backgrounds. Some cases in point are, the ‘democracy problem’ identified earlier, or the turning of ‘outcomes’ (‘good governance’, ‘democratic governance’) into a preconstructed component of ‘governance’, conflating the normative (practice) with the analytical, and ‘scaling it up’ to the global ‘level’.

Eagleton-Pierce (2014, 2016), in his historical-analytical review, tracing the evolution of the meanings of ‘governance’, argues that some of these conflation problems stem from the fact that the term has “corporate roots” and solidified some of its current meanings after the economic and social crisis and ‘political bankruptcy’ in the “Anglophone heartland” of the 1970s:

Initially, the first people who began thinking about the term and elaborating upon its meaning were those who were confronting a legitimacy deficit in a vital institution: the American corporation. (...) It is important to recall that
during this period the public image of the US corporation was greatly
damaged as a result of revelations of executive misbehaviour and unruliness.
(…) The vagueness of the expression did not detract from its value,
particularly in terms of communicating with multiple audiences. (2014: 11-12).

By the 1980s, argues Eagleton-Pierce, the word ‘governance’ proliferated from the
corporate to the political arena. At the time, one of its most influential early adopters
was the World Bank and that “strongly informed how the expression has been
understood, both in the development policy world and the academy” (2014: 13).
There is no space here to reproduce Eagleton-Pierce’s argument in full; however,
some of the most important points he makes are about the ways the World Bank
added multiple layers to the meaning of governance in accordance with the political
dimensions they felt ‘governance’ needed to address. Thus, in the late 1980s,
“political legitimacy and consensus” were defined as preconditions, not results, of
any ‘good governance’ models. Later, in the mid-1990s, the rule of law, state
effectiveness and controlling corruption were added. By the 2000s “voice and
accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, and regulatory quality”
appeared as well (2014: 14).

As the concept evolved, it has been adapted “to manage problems of legitimacy
within relations of power” and the application of the term implied that “it is
paradoxically all about power and yet not about power”, flitting between “hierarchical
ordering (long tied to state rule) and the modern appeal to horizontal networking
(expressed as established institutions of power who ‘consensually’ work with multiple
agents on collective problems)” (2014: 16). Thus, concludes Eagleton-Pierce,

[O]ne should be alert to how the legitimation of agendas under the heading of
‘governance’, as with the Bank’s policy interventions, may in fact be
encouraging or enabling more intense and sophisticated forms of control on
the part of already privileged actors. (2014: 16)

After this brief detour into the history of the concept, it is easier to see that such
‘categories of practice’ produced ‘by design’ by powerful and self-interested actors,
are often uncritically adopted into academic understandings – ‘categories of analysis’
– reifying categories, reproducing cultural bias, and creating hard boundaries around
groups, as they are presented acting together for ‘common/shared interests’. That,
by extension, also means that the way ‘governance’ is conceptualised makes it
‘group oriented’ rather than ‘problem-oriented’ and while it exponentially multiplies
the number of groups to be examined (e.g. the ‘complexity argument’ claims that the
number of ‘actors’ increased to almost ‘unmanageable’ levels) at the same time it
takes them for granted and does not pay much attention to the dynamic process of
‘group-making’ and/or ‘group-breaking’.
This, something that emerged from the analysis of the scholarship, highlights that such categories are not just occasional and accidental ‘labels’, but bounded and well-demarcated categories where generating a perpetual feeling of ‘crisis’ – mirrored in scholarship as well – leads to frequent ‘classification struggles’, i.e. actors fight over legitimacy and who should have a right to exert symbolic power and violence.

Finally, another drawback of such approaches is the frequent conflation of power and governance. This, on the one hand, silences the less powerful. On the other hand, it becomes a component of ‘empowering’ them. However, the latter – in turn – reifies their agency instead of exploring its possibilities and limits, frustrating their horizons of action – and, ironically – limiting their agency further (for a detailed discussion of such paradoxes see Eagleton-Pierce, 2016).

4. Conclusions

In summary, this critical review argues that although the existing scholarship provides important insights into socio-political and economic phenomena that were often grouped under a common heading called ‘governance’, many of the currently used theoretical-analytical frameworks display serious limitations for empirical research. To gain better insights into this exponentially growing and still rather ‘messy’ field, this literature review experiments with a novel approach, designing an ‘analytical cartography’ that creates some ‘order’ across disciplinary, thematic, regional and theoretical fields. In a first step, it suggests that the field be viewed as a shared ‘discursive space’ where one can seek to identify ‘emergent commonalities’, so-called because they are present as key frames in a significant part of the existing scholarship. After coding the material, this critical review saw six significant indicators, shared ‘commonalities’ to emerge: actors, activities/practices, techniques/methods, scope, values, and outcomes. Early on, it became clear that these ‘commonalities’ were in dynamic and overlapping relationships, and so were conceptualised as domains, not as insulated ‘categories’.

In a next analytical step – and because scholarship frequently positions the six domains across time and space, and in relation to power and scale – understandings of these four concepts in relation to ‘governance’ were explored. It is argued here that, even though a significant part of the scholarship uses ‘time’, ‘space’, ‘power’ and ‘scale’ as ‘externalities’ – that is, as static and fixed variables, not as produced in/through social interactions – and sees them as similar to each other, they can neither be treated as ‘externalities’ nor should they be perceived as being alike.

Finally, in a last step, this review explores some of the analytical ‘paradoxes’ that emerged because of the problems and inconsistencies that were identified during the above analytical steps. Most importantly, this highlights that since most studies a priori assume the existence of ‘governance’, ‘governance’ becomes both the object and the tool of analysis, explanandum and explananas. That is, existing research
frequently tells us what ‘governance’ is and how it works based on predetermined definitions, preselected variables, and predesigned theories, instead of exploring governance-related processes and mechanisms as more open-ended inquiries. Some of the consequences of this approach are: 1) ‘governance’ research ‘creates’ rather than explores reality; 2) it produces a series of silences – things that become obscured because they are not included in the predetermined ‘imaginings’ of ‘governance; 3) it leads to over ‘theorisation’ – a situation where to deal with a reality perceived as overly complex, all phenomena identified are incorporated into theories, causing the number of theories to grow exponentially; and, 4) it creates ‘demarcation problems’ between ‘categories of practice’ and ‘categories of analysis’, reifying governance as an externally/objectively existing and physically translatable reality, and imbuing ‘governance’ categories with cultural – mostly western-centered – biases.

At the beginning, this review posits that – both in scholarship and policy and media discourse – there is widespread debate about a crisis in/of governance and governance failure(s). It points out that there are at least three streams in scholarship: one, that is centered/focuses on the state but sees the demise of the nation state and the hollowing out of its traditional roles, claiming that there is a crisis across fields and levels. Another strand removes (nation) states from its focus and explores networked relationships across levels and regions, understating or dismissing crisis arguments. Finally, a last strand, highly critically, argues that framing research inquiries through governance is, itself, the problem, as the term has no analytical value, hence the crisis becomes disciplinary/scholarly. This review, while it engages only in little detail with the first two strands (addressing many of the main arguments of such texts throughout the analysis), does engage in depth in a critical analysis of understandings and uses of the concept. If, for the moment we accept that there is a crisis at all, one thing that emerged is that it might primarily be a disciplinary crisis, with many inconsistencies and analytical paradoxes remaining unaddressed in the field. That, in turn, can – and often does – strongly impact on the ways scholars see a ‘crisis’ emerging, and explore and conceptualise ‘governance’ practice and processes.

Going forward, without claiming to offer a solution or an overarching model, this review argues that it is well worth considering that one way to address such limitations is to identify the ‘structural silences’ that have emerged from the ‘governance’ model depicted in Figure II and have begun to be explored in this critical review. Adding those to existing research inquiries holds promise in efforts to understand the complexities of ‘governance’ in a more comprehensive way. An additional possibility (around which there is already a growing body of scholarship) is to deconstruct longstanding assumptions that are rarely questioned, for example, about networks, cooperation, hierarchies, etc. It would help if we, as scholars, would not only identify the analytical categories, frameworks, and domains on which we base and conduct our research but would clarify and define those individually and separately, instead of writing umbrella definitions, such as ‘governance’. Simply
using the word ‘governance’ as our central concept (and in so doing, assuming it is possible to have a shared and universally accepted definition for a term that is applied differently on different scales and in different settings) makes us complacent; we stop exploring underlying processes and relationships among variables.

Finally, as governance presents itself as both object and tool of analysis in existing frameworks, this paper also argues that – from an analytical point of view – it makes little or no sense to continue to do research on ‘governance’ using such frameworks, unless we do the following:

1. Problematise the concept itself and trace its genealogy and the political role it plays in society and for different actors. Some literature already exists related to this argument, but comparatively speaking, it is marginalised in relation to the other, ‘pro-governance’ arguments (e.g. Offe 2009, Eagleton-Pierce 2014, Hofferberth 2014, Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, de Sousa Santos 2009).

2. Rethink the key domains around which research and scholarship are built and design a framework that addresses at least some of the structural imbalances that exist in the field. The question then emerges: Can the diagram in Figure II, created to reflect relationships within governance scholarship, be used as a basis for designing a new analytical framework? This review suggests that, although Figure II is intentionally drawn in a way to visualise existing structural imbalances in the field, with some changes that correct/rectify the analytical fallacies identified above, it can be used as one possible analytical framework for future research on governance. The changes that are needed are as follows: First, as ‘outcomes’ – from an analytical point of view – proved to be highly problematic in relationship to the other domains and the central field, it should be removed from the six domains, leaving only five domains as future analytical categories: actors, activities/practices, techniques/methods, values and scope. Research needs to account for the dynamics within and among these five domains, leaving identifying and explaining outcomes as only one possible way forward for research. Second, ‘governance’ has to be moved from the centre of the diagram as it should be perceived as only one possible process and phenomenon that emerges from the intersection of a variety of underlying processes. This means that it would not be necessary for researchers to define ‘governance’ before beginning their inquiries and, therefore, frees them to formulate and ask innovative/non-traditional questions that suggest and/or inform new types of research inquiries. ‘Governance’ could then become the ‘object’ of analysis, without also having to be the tool of analysis. Finally, as visualised in Figure IV below, the centre should be kept open as a relational field where variables – such as space, time, scale, and power – that are produced in social interactions can be located. They would still need to be explored and qualified on each occasion. However, their relation to other domains would be less confusing and reduce possible conflicts. The time-space continuum could remain as an outer circle, reflecting
the fact that time and space are not only socially produced, but can also be independent from, and external to, human/social interactions. Figure IV incorporates and visualises these changes.

Figure IV. A possible new model for designing research on governance

If we take this approach, one possibility that becomes more visible is ‘governance’ emerging in the centre of the diagram, but not as equalling ‘power’ – as it is often understood in current scholarship – but as one particular form of domination where actors exercise ‘power’ through ‘governance’, using it as a conceptual tool for promoting different types of ideologies. The short historical discussion above, about the role of the World Bank in developing layered meanings for the concept, is a case in point. For future research, this analytical approach might serve as one possible model, asking better questions about, for example, 1) the fields in which ‘governance’ first emerged as a ‘tool’ for power sharing and/or domination; 2) how, when and why that happens; and 3) how are then boundaries of ‘groups’ challenged, and actors displaced and/or replaced.

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