Ideas have careers just as certainly as do people. The careers of ideas also often resemble those of people in their trajectories. Some endure in a steady, unspectacular way, seemingly inserting themselves everywhere: ‘bureaucracy’ might be an example. Some explode in a glittering fashion, illuminating everything, and subsiding just as quickly: think of the short, glamorous career of ‘corporatism’ which, perhaps appropriately, did not long survive as an analytical notion the passing of the era of glam rock.

Is governance the new corporatism – a celebrity concept that dazzles for a few years and is then spent? The authors of this ambitious study make clear at the beginning that they have contemplated this possibility. As they say, ‘twenty years ago nobody would have written this book’ but governance in the last two decades has become a ‘fashionable and challenging’ concept. It is no surprise that the authors believe that its attractions go beyond fashion. The book is an attempt at a state of the art synthesis of where we presently stand with the idea. The range is impressive. For once here is a product that does what it says on the tin: provides a cross-disciplinary account. Separate chapters examine the history, opportunities and criticisms of ‘governance’ in political science, the new institutional economics, international relations, development studies, socio-legal studies and corporate governance. These chapters are folded inside an opening analytic introduction to (and defence of) the use of the word; two chapters that provide case studies, of participation and of environmental governance; and a conclusion which attempts to develop some normative principles, and some principles of institutional design, from the governance literature.

This is a brave book – and I do not mean that as mandarin code for foolhardy. In a world where disciplinary specialization is becoming more pronounced, and where academics have elevated pure research over the messy problems of application, here are two social scientists from very different disciplinary traditions (political science and economics) who have attempted a real collaboration. Moreover, the book is animated throughout by a willingness to go beyond pure research questions and to ask, in effect: what use is all this to the practical policy-maker? Moreover, the ambition to provide us with a state of the art account is very successfully realized. For the moment, this is the book to put into the hands of anyone – policy-maker or student – who wonders what all the fuss over governance is about. The authors have read just about everything, and the book ransacks their reading to provide as comprehensive a literature review as one could wish.

It is not the authors’ fault if much of what they say is unconvincing, for in describing the state of the art, they also end up revealing the deficiencies of the art. The really successful chapters here are those on public administration and political science, and on international relations: in these fields, whatever the arguments about the robustness of the evidence that we really are in a new world of governance, there plainly has been a great flowering of literature. But ‘governance’ is not only fashionable and challenging; it is promiscuous, embedding itself in all sorts of settings, and losing most of its analytical sharpness in the process. There is, for example, a literature on ‘corporate governance’, and some of it is reviewed in the relevant chapter of this book. But all it shares with the governance literature in political science is the label. Indeed, the drift of corporate governance for
two decades has been precisely in the reverse direction predicted by ‘political science’ governance: towards more juridified, more command-like modes of public control over enterprises; and the outcome of the present regulatory catastrophes in capitalist economies will push corporate governance further in that direction. The chapter on ‘participatory governance’ is particularly unconvincing. Writing a review chapter on aspects of the participation literature is fine; substituting the two words ‘participatory governance’ wherever the single word ‘participation’ would do just as well adds nothing – except a few words to the length of the chapter. Some of the chapters are lost opportunities: in the discussion of governance in socio-legal studies we get Foucault, but no Teubner and no reflexive law – two elements that would have strengthened the authors’ arguments.

There are, nevertheless, some unsatisfactory features of the book that were within the control of the authors. The proof reading has been sloppy, or drafting has been careless; at any rate there are typos and clumsy forms that could have been eradicated by a more careful final read. This, then, is state of the art as far as governance is concerned. If you need to be briefed authoritatively and economically, this is the book for you. But I remain convinced that the authors’ initial fear is well founded: that this is a celebrity concept with a limited shelf life. Thus, if you do not have time to get to grips with governance, do not worry; there will be another fashionable concept along any day soon.

Michael Moran

University of Manchester