
The Government Nobody Knows—nor Wants to Know

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We live in the era of big government, a time when government is expected to solve all problems, when the word *government* is on everyone's lips. Yet, strangely, practically everyone, from scholars to the general public, seems quite vague about its specific nature.

You can confirm the popular confusion by asking friends and neighbors, "What is the definition of 'government'?" I have been posing this question for some time now, and I seldom get a clear, confident response. Many draw a blank, saying, "I've never really thought about it," or "I haven't a clue."

Some attempt answers. For example, they propose that "government is the thing that governs."

When I gently suggest that's circular, some redouble their efforts: "Government is the organization that makes rules for society."

I point out that churches also make rules for society. So do writers of editorials. So what's the difference, specifically?

They try a different tack. "But government is the expression of the entire community, not just of a particular subgroup. Government's rules are legitimate."

I ask, "Were Hitler's rules legitimate?"

"Of course not."

"Then Germany had no government from 1933 to 1945?"

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The strange thing about all this confusion is that we actually do have in our minds a quite simple, specific definition of *government*, a definition that we implicitly apply when talking about government. We can uncover this definition by starting with the idea that many people mention: government is the organization that makes rules—it governs, it exercises authority, it defines right and wrong. The problem, as already noted, is that all organizations, from the smallest stamp club to the largest corporation, make rules, exercise authority, and define right and wrong. So we have to ask: What does government have that all these other rule-making organizations lack?

At this point, most people will say that government is special because it can *enforce* its rules. That’s a beginning, but it still won’t narrow things down because every organization “enforces” its rules in some way or another, to some degree or another. It may use moral force, persuasion, pleading, shaming, shunning, nagging, and, of course, economic incentives. For example, every employer “enforces” its rules of employee conduct by threatening to fire—cease paying—employees who break them. What makes government’s enforcement of its rules different? If, for example, government passed a rule that said restaurants must build a handicap access ramp, how would it enforce that rule?

Now we get to the heart of the matter. When government agents find a restaurant without the access ramp, they do not rely on persuasion or education. They do not offer to give the owner money so that he can build a ramp. *They threaten him with the use of physical force.* At first, this threat takes the form of a legal document: a summons or a fine. But if the owner, believing the rule to be foolish or unjust, ignores the document, the government does not simply forget the case. It sends police officers to seize the owner’s property or to drag him to jail or both.

This is what is distinctive about government, compared to all other organizations: it employs physical force to uphold its rules. If you take away from government its specialists in force—the police officers and soldiers—you don’t have government. You would have an organization that might be respected in the way a conclave of religious figures or a group of scientists are respected, but it would not be feared—and probably not be widely obeyed.

Here’s the definition of *government*, then: *government is the organization that directs the regular, public use of physical force in a territory and makes rules upheld with the threat of force.*

We include the word *public* in the definition to distinguish government from people who use force out of the public eye—robbers and murderers. They act with surprise or stealth. The agents of government, in contrast, act publically. They announce they’re coming at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow to take away our property, in broad daylight. We also include the word *regular* in the definition to distinguish government from military units that might exist during a state of civil war. A government is an organization sufficiently established to apply force repeatedly and consistently to uphold the rules it may approve. This regularity generally takes the form of laws, bureaucracies, and courts.

This definition will, I believe, apply to all the cases we have in mind when we use the word *government*. Notice that our definition does not require that the organization be good or beneficial in any way. For example, we say “foolish government,” which implies that wisdom is not a necessary part of our definition. In a similar fashion, we say “undemocratic government,” “vicious government,” “corrupt government,” and “destructive government.” This use of terms reveals that we do not require—as part of our own internalized definition—that the organization be democratic, kind, honest, or constructive. For example, no one says that North Korea lacks a government. We all know that there is an organization (headed by Kim Jong-un) that directs the regular public use of force. It uses its soldiers and police officers to put hundreds of thousands of people in concentration camps. We may think that this organization is deplorable from almost any point of view, but these negative characteristics do not exclude it from our definition of “government.”

An Unconscious Pattern of Avoidance

As I shared this forced-oriented definition of the term *government* with people, I encountered two reactions. A tiny minority readily agreed with it; they had no problem accepting the point that the use of physical force is the defining characteristic of government.

The overwhelming majority of my contacts, however, refused to accept this definition, even as they remained quite vague about what the definition ought to be. As I explored their unease, it emerged that in most cases an emotional component swayed their thinking. They wanted to see government as a noble, elevated entity capable of helping people and solving society’s problems. This impulse is reflected in the way we have housed government. We do not put these units in brick office buildings in the industrial park on the edge of town. We build cathedral-like marble monuments for them. It was this vaunted image my respondents had in mind when they heard the definition of government that focuses on the use of force. To their way of thinking, this definition was too blunt and distasteful a way of referring to an institution they wanted to admire.

Their resistance reflects a general cultural reluctance to connect “force” to the term *government*. Some time ago, I spent a morning at the main reference room of the Library of Congress scouring all the dictionaries I could find for their definitions of *government*. Not one of them, not even the biggest, gave a clear, useable definition. All they had was vague, circular language. For example, the massive *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, gives as its first definition of *government* “[t]he action of governing.” Its other definitions are no more helpful. For example, number six is “[t]he system according to which a nation or community is governed.” One thing stood out clearly in this evasive, fuzzy verbiage, however: none of these dozens of dictionaries mentions “force” in connection with “government.”

Professional political scientists do not do much better when it comes to defining *government*. I went through both undergraduate and graduate studies in government

without being given a clear, workable definition of the institution that was the focus of our discipline. Only many decades later did I realize that a powerful unconscious process of avoidance was at work.

For example, one prominent writer back then—David Easton (president of the American Political Science Association, among other honors)—wrote a 320-page treatise, *The Political System*, that attempted to narrow down what it is that political scientists are supposed to study. After working his way through many possible conceptions, he finally decided that “the political system consists of all those interacting elements which contribute to the authoritative allocation of values” (1953, 319). Even as a green graduate student, I could see that “the authoritative allocation of values” applied to everything that happened in the world, from trading cattle futures on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange to Mom’s rules about eating your vegetables, and therefore failed to narrow anything down.

Easton’s comprehensive effort to define government had a striking omission: in 320 pages, he never mentioned the use of physical force. He never mentioned government’s millions of police officers and soldiers or the tens of thousands of jails and prisons that in the United States today hold more than 2.2 million prisoners. Among these prisoners are people who failed to heed government’s demands for funds—that is, taxes. In 2015, for example, 2,498 people were sent to government’s prisons for tax evasion (Internal Revenue Service 2015, 2). And, of course, the fear of this application of physical force upholds the tax system on which government’s welfare state depends. Easton’s lengthy exposition failed even to allude to this harsh reality.

This vagueness in attempting to define *government* (or *state*) while resolutely avoiding mentioning the use of force is the typical pattern in academia. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science* illustrates the point. Its *government* entry fails to give any definition and begins with highly evasive language: “Government is an abstract term referring to the style, range, scope, purposes and degree of control” (Bealey 1999, 147). Its 900-word commentary on *government* never mentions force, police officers, or jails.

One exception to this pattern of avoiding the mention of force is British sociologist Anthony Giddens. He says, “A state can be defined as a political organization whose rule is territorially ordered and which is able to mobilize the means of violence to sustain that rule.” Significantly, his definition is considered unusual. He observes that sociologists have for generations avoided connecting the state to the use of force, an omission he considers one of the “extraordinary lapses in sociological thought” (1987, 20, 22).

Changing Attitudes toward Force

Apparently, practically everyone—dictionary makers, scholars, the man in the street—is unwilling to face the fact that government involves the use of physical force. What

accounts for this widespread resistance? To understand it, we need to review the cultural trend in attitudes toward the use of force.

Historical research has documented that over the course of thousands of years a broad movement against force has been at work in the world (Hibbert 1963; Pritchard 1971; Mueller 1989; Howard 1991; Keeley 1996; Payne 2004; Goldstein 2011; Pinker 2011). In earlier times, the use of physical force was common and widely accepted. Human sacrifice was practiced practically everywhere. Genocide was viewed as a God-ordained practice. War was glorified and considered an inevitable part of national life. Crowds loved to watch bloody executions, and capital punishment was employed in all countries and with great frequency. Dueling was considered a noble way to settle disputes. Whipping children was considered necessary for their proper rearing. Over time, however, the human race has come to understand that the use of physical force is highly destructive of human values, and opinion has gradually moved against it.

This evolution against the use of force has proceeded at different rates in different regions, leaving some cultures centuries behind others. For example, in a few places, grisly public executions for religious reasons are still carried out. But in the rest of the world this practice has been abandoned and is now considered deplorable. The Spanish are embarrassed about the thousands of humans executed in the Inquisition; Americans now condemn the hanging of “witches” in Salem, Massachusetts.

As a result of this deep and powerful evolution, we are today—in the more advanced cultures, anyway—uncomfortable about the use of physical force. It seems an unsavory practice, a type of control that a sensitive, moral person would avoid. You can document this skepticism by asking acquaintances this simple question: “Is force a healthy foundation for social reform?” Most people I have asked say, “No.”

It seems plausible that the modern vagueness in defining government stems from this uneasiness about recognizing its use of force. After all, today, government *is* the foundation for social reform. It is seen as the benevolent agent that is supposed to right wrongs and fix shortcomings, from low wages to racial prejudice. It is supposed to fill social needs from health care to education, from retirement income to housing. We don’t want to detract from this institution by pointing out its tainted basis in force. As a result, almost everyone slips into a pattern of euphemism and avoidance. The pensioner says of his Social Security check, “I’m just getting back what I paid in.” He would be embarrassed to say, “I’m benefitting from a system based on force.” The socialist orator thinks himself virtuous when declaring, “Government should address the problem of economic inequality.” It would appear tasteless, if not downright vicious, for him to say, “We should use the threat of force to correct economic inequality.”

It’s a simple matter of avoiding inconsistency: if you want to use government for good purposes, you will be inclined to repress its distasteful aspect, its basis in force. The converse also follows: if you are fully aware of government’s use of force, you are less likely to look to it to carry out benevolent purposes. The philosopher John Locke illustrates the point. Writing in 1690, before the fastidiousness about force had set in, Locke had no difficulty pointing to government’s brutal foundation. “Political power,”

he declared, “I take to be a right of making laws with penalties of death . . . and of employing the force of the community” (Locke 1962, 4). His well-known *Second Treatise on Civil Government* is studded with references to force, violence, and war. Given this grim, realistic picture of government, Locke did not look to this body to fund nursery schools or to care for the elderly. In his thinking, its function is a limited one: to use its physical force to resist violent aggressors—to act against robbers, murderers, gangs, and foreign invaders.

This same connection between frank language and the reluctance to embrace the state as the universal problem solver is illustrated in modern times by libertarians. Unusual in their welfare-state skepticism, libertarians are also unusual in the openness with which they refer to government’s coercive foundation. For example, *A Brief History of Libertarianism* (Zwolinski and Tomasi 2017), a total of fifty-eight pages long, uses the term *force* twenty-five times and the term *voluntary* eight times.¹

The Future of Government

We have a paradox, then: the public deplores the use of force yet is deeply committed to the programs of big government, which are based on force. How will this contradiction play out in the coming years?

I don’t think we can expect support for activist government to disappear promptly, for it is sustained by massive interests and deeply rooted preconceptions. But it does seem likely that in the long run government is headed for significant diminution. After all, the movement against the use of force has been at work for millennia, sweeping aside other force-based practices, from human sacrifice to slavery, that were in their day considered absolutely unshakable. It is unlikely that government, a force-based institution, will be exempt from this historical trend.

One process that might promote this trend is a semantic shift. Today, the dependence on government is assisted by the veil of obscurity about its real character that I have examined here. This may change. People may become willing to refer explicitly in dictionaries, in newspapers, and in conversation to government’s basis in force. When someone, pointing to a social ill, says, “Government should fix X,” his neighbor might urge him to state his proposal frankly: “Don’t you mean to say, ‘Government *should employ the threat of force* to fix X?’” This won’t change opinions on the spot, but it may

1. Another writer of yesteryear who had no trouble recognizing government’s connection to violence was the German social theorist Max Weber. In a talk given in 1918 titled “Politics as a Vocation,” he offered this definition of the state: “[A] state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” ([1918] 2009, 78). Weber was quite frank in connecting force to the role of government—for example, “Whoever wants to engage in politics at all . . . lets himself in for the diabolical forces lurking in all violence” (125–26), or, “Whoever contracts with violent means for whatever ends—and every politician does—is exposed to its specific consequences” (124).

foster a process of awareness that in the long run may dim the enthusiasm for government action.

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