

**Theorizing (Dis)Order  
Governing in an Uncertain World**

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*The World Peace Foundation  
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy  
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## Overview

Today's globalized and securitized world is defined by instability, uncertainty, and turbulence. As the international community grapples with new threats, emanating from the transnational to the very local, scholars and policymakers continue to promote democratic institution-building—guided by ideas of accountability, transparency, and institutional stability—as solutions. And yet, the liberal state-building project cannot explain why, nonetheless, disorder remains pervasive. To understand current trends in international and domestic relations, it is necessary to account for order *and* disorder.

The seminar brought together a diverse group of scholars who study how unpredictability, disorder, and turbulence are produced, performed, invoked, and allocated as a means of shaping—or even constituting—strategies of governance. Scholars from anthropology, economics, and political science with expertise in regions including Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East discussed theoretical frameworks for understanding the relationship between (dis)order and governance. Scholars explored the question of disorder in a number of contexts, including in relation to the formal and informal security sector, financial markets, decentralization, governing borderlands, and elite pacts. The seminar identified different frameworks and avenues of inquiry into how various combinations of order and disorder constitute and shape governance strategies.

The seminar took an agnostic approach as to the normative value of order, recognizing that order and disorder are frequently intertwined in hybrid strategies that organize and distribute (dis)order to different people, places, and times.

Our participants focused on how certain political systems survive and even thrive amid disorder and chaos (Reno, de Waal), how disorder reflects broad historical and political processes (Das), how disorder can be efficient and effective as a strategy of rule (Tapscott), the relationship between disorder and values of freedom and liberty (Lombard), and how disorder can shape the relationship between center and periphery (Eaton, de Waal). Questions raised at the seminar included: How is disorder produced, contained, instrumentalized, managed and used in relation to order? What do complex processes of ordering and disordering look like? What strategies of control are employed, such as surveillance, states of exception, or jurisdictional uncertainty? How can these processes be disrupted by internal or external actors?

## Panel Presentations

### I. Theorizing (Dis)Order: Exploratory Remarks

How should we understand order and disorder in relation to existing theories of governance? Alex de Waal opened the seminar with a reflection on relevant terms, some key theoretical frameworks, and a brief historicization of the concepts. In particular, the terms helped tease out certain assumptions about where unpredictability might reside. For example, terms such as “turbulence” assume a stable overall shape within which we might observe fluidity or unpredictable movements. “Volatility” suggests unpredictable changes over time. “Unintelligibility” or “illegibility” presume that while one individual may be unable to interpret a thing’s true identity, it is not fundamentally unknowable.

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In considering these terms, de Waal offered three ideal-types describing the relationship between governance and disorder: governing *amidst* disorder, *through* disorder, and *despite* disorder. He further noted that Africanist literature can offer a useful starting point to unpick these relationships, turning to literature that grapples with the imbrication of state and society, the fluidity of public and private spaces, and the concomitant production of an unpredictable and fragile governance environment, through literatures on the instrumentalization of disorder (Chabal and Daloz 1999), governance and (dis)order from below (Scott 2009), switching registers of claim-making such that it resembles oscillation rather than evolution (Phillips forthcoming), and the relationship between unpredictability and markets.

De Waal further historicized theories of disorder and governance, focusing on how colonial interventions and global capitalism undermined indigenous social, economic and political orders, resulting in sustained disorder. This produced new governance arrangements that melded bureaucratic state structures with logics of private exchange. Participants noted that new tools of governance—such as surveillance and data—may facilitate new strategies of instrumentalizing disorder that may have been too risky in the past.

## II. (Dis)Order, Ordinary Citizens, and the State

Is disorder a tool for rulers or the ruled? Case studies of the Central African Republic (CAR) and Uganda provide two dramatically different perspectives. While in CAR, Louisa Lombard described a poorly or ungoverned frontier that results in disorder, in northern Uganda, Rebecca Tapscott described a governance system that thrives through the production of disorder.

Lombard’s work examines an environment in which violence erupts unpredictably from interactions between citizens and anti-poaching guards. Arguing that patterns emerge from anarchy and disorder,

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Lombard demonstrates how both can be used to protect values that are integral to the community, or by the state as a tool of governance. The communities in northeastern CAR resist what they view as over-regulation imposed by anti-poaching laws, at times by resorting to violence. For Lombard, the eruption of violent conflict is not a question of in-groups versus out-groups but rather, that when locals perceive threats to their values—in particular, the value of liberty—they resist.

On the other hand, Tapscott’s research depicts an environment in which Uganda’s ruling regime uses unpredictable assertions (and occasional denials) of its authority, backed by the threat and memory of overwhelming force, to fragment citizen organization, and thus preclude the emergence of a meaningful civil society that might be able to make claims on the state. These unpredictable assertions of authority produce the regime as hegemonic in the imaginations of the population while the government avoids the direct costs associated with direct rule as well as the principal-agent problems associated with indirect rule. This results in persistent, low-level uncertainty in the security and justice sectors, which precludes the emergence of a functional civil-society.

The two case studies provide different conceptions of disorder and agency. Lombard understands disorder as a reflection of competing values that result in seemingly unpredictable eruptions of violence, that would be legible if we were to unravel the competing values at play. In contrast, Tapscott understands disorder as inherently unpredictable, such that the individuals who are governed by the system struggle to predict what will happen to them in matters of security and justice. These differences may to some extent reflect an underlying view of agency—while Lombard’s approach emphasizes the liberal subject, Tapscott’s analysis is structural. These two empirically and locally grounded works in nearby countries offer food for thought for how disorder functions to either further empower those who govern, or as a tool produced by the marginalized to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis the state.

## III. Decentralization, National, and Sub-National Governance



Waves of decentralization and recentralization have driven the relationships between national and subnational authorities over the past few decades. The key argument driving this panel was Eaton’s thesis that disorder as a territorial phenomenon is deployed as a powerful justification of decentralization or recentralization.

Eaton provided multiple examples of how this thesis holds in Latin America, and during the panel discussion, seminar participants explained how it is also a valid lens to understand the conflict between center and periphery in other contexts like countries in Africa, the Kurdish/Iraqi region, and Helmand Province in Afghanistan.

The panel also discussed how resource endowment and number of actors involved in processes of decentralization conditions the decentralization/recentralization process. Political actors and non-state actors can use order or disorder strategically as a vehicle to justify their ideological or practical preference for altering the relationship between the center and periphery. National and subnational actors/politicians are engaged in a zero sum game, where the distribution of power and the allocation of autonomy is the key element that guides their actions. Actors have a better chance of winning these contestations if they can credibly claim that the other party is failing to exercise their authority in issues like security and stability.

Finally, Eaton also argued that both state and non-state actors draw upon destabilizing mechanisms to justify their claims for decentralization/recentralization. For example, while violence and insecurity were a justification to recentralize power in Fujimori’s Peru, combating violence and insecurity served as the justification for the decentralization process in Colombia. Hence, the determination of using order or disorder does not depend exclusively on the type of actor, but mainly on the particular context of each country.

The key takeaway of the panel was that order and disorder can serve as mechanisms of governance or as mechanisms through which political actors justify their decision to decentralize or recentralize power and autonomy between different level of government.

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#### **IV. Techniques of Power and the Rise of the Grotesque**

Veena Das discussed order and disorder as they relate to techniques of power, the figure of the Grotesque (drawing on Foucault), and citizen responses to state performances of authority. She drew examples from Chinese governance, the U.S. elections, and life in Indian slums around Delhi.

Not all who hold sovereign power have the capacity or necessary characteristics to do so. In fact, some of those who are empowered display traits, which should exclude them from authority. Foucault calls this phenomenon the Grotesque, “the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have



effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having.” The Grotesque is, in part, comic, but it is a dark comedy. The figure attracts attention because it is ridiculous. However, the Grotesque is not harmless; it can kill. As a result, the Grotesque is also tragic.

One of the technologies of power deployed by the Grotesque is distraction. In a study of the Chinese government’s response to criticism, Gary King and colleagues concluded that it does not censor criticism on the internet. Instead, the government intervenes when it senses that its citizenry might mobilize against government action. The state would pay government officials to impede citizens’ collective action through posting large numbers of trivial messages in online forums to overwhelm communications about politically-

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salient events and thereby distract civilians from collective action. In America, both President Trump’s road to the presidency and presidency itself have been characterized by a distraction strategy. It remains unclear whether Trump intentionally practices politics of distraction or is simply attuned to it and rewarded by it.

In both these cases, Grotesque technologies of power result in compliance from constituents. What explains constituent compliance? Does compliance emerge from a particular kind of history?

Das documents micro-shifts over extended periods of time in Indian communities in Delhi. She argued that to the external observer, life in the periphery appears insecure or unstable. However, those inside the system are consistently using the spaces available to create security for themselves. These methods that appear to be used “inside chaos” are not always legal. According to Das, this ensuing tension between order and disorder, legality and illegality, emerges from the reality that disorder may be necessary for life to persist. Das complicates the idea that centralized authority can use policy to resolve these challenges. At times, when policies are introduced to bring order to disorderly discourse, it fails. Das rejected the belief that policy could trickle down from the top and emerge as planned. Instead, she asks what can emerge from discourse that resists ordering? How can policy be generated from within the disorder?

## V. Becoming a Capable State and Navigating Uncertainty

Implicit in much of the theoretical conversation about order and disorder is the notion of state capacity and institutional development and strength. If, as de Waal suggests, there are three ideal-types of relationships between governance and disorder—governing *amidst* disorder, *through* disorder, and *despite* disorder—then states of varying levels of capacity will have differential abilities and interests to choose one of these governance strategies. This panel treated this topic from two complementary perspectives: Daron Acemoglu outlined a model for how states develop capacity and Will Reno discussed how states navigate the international system, with varying degrees of success in an emerging era of global uncertainty.



Acemoglu argues that state capabilities emerge from the competition between civil society and elites (or the institutions they control). He identifies a constant struggle between the elite-dominated state and civil society. As the state attempts to exert dominance over society, it generates institutional capacities. Yet, civil society pushes back. To counter the state, societies invest in coordination and organizational capacities as well.

This struggle results in different levels of state capacity and civil society capacity in global polities. Acemoglu suggests three ideal types. One is the “Despotic Leviathan” where the state has high capacity but low civil society participation (e.g., Prussia, China). On the other side of the spectrum is the “Absent Leviathan” where the state does not have the capacity to extend itself over society, leading to a decentralized power systems, which could include multiple centers of power (Central African Republic, Afghanistan). This could be seen as a form of disorder. The third ideal type is the “Shackled Leviathan” where a balance of power between the state and society creates incentives to generate state capacity that is responsive to its own society (United States, Britain).

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This necessarily implies that historical legacies matter and such conditions set ground rules for state-society competition. Yet, Acemoglu argues against an overly-deterministic model. After all, we see a diversity of state-society relations in polities with common histories, similar initial conditions and subject to similar structural influences. These differences in state-society capacities might not lie in large structural factors, but in smaller differences that get amplified at different moments during the constant competition between the elite-driven state and society.

This perspective cuts against many theorists’ understanding of state formation. Traditional approaches to understanding disparities in state capacities, such as those formulated by Huntington, Fukuyama, North, Wallis, and Weingast, are not only unhelpful, Acemoglu argues, but also mostly incorrect. They come up short by overlooking that capable states emerge from the competition between civil society and political elites.

Reno’s work analyzes many of the same issues of state capacity, but from the perspective of today’s international system, one he characterized as increasingly uncertain. Reno focuses on the state and both its role in the international system, and how, in the context of order, disorder, or uncertainty, the state navigates these ever-changing pressures and circumstances.

The argument is grounded in the assumption that the world order was determined by a hegemonic US dominance grounded on liberal ideas. However, contemporary changes in US’s role as a primary architect and enforcer of the world order—changes accelerated by the newly elected 45<sup>th</sup> American President—have particular significance for governance in weaker states within the international system. A US administration that prioritizes a nationalistic agenda and a disregard for free trade, the new international system will morph to one of competitive multipolarity.



This shift will have severe consequences for weak states for two central reasons. First, it will allow governments to use violence against their own societies and ignore basic human rights norms. Reno expects that in an uncertain world this is likely to result in interstate and intrastate conflict as actors are free to be more aggressive, often violently. Second, weak states will be more exposed to the raw elements of global power politics and thus be more susceptible to the predatory desires of their neighbors or the interests of the major players in the international system. In this scenario, hard power elements of states will become more versatile tools for regime protection, both domestically and regionally. Correspondingly, there will be an erosion of the tendency for formal sovereignty to act as a shield for the weakest states.

#### IV. Conclusions

The seminar discussed how order and disorder relate to strategies of governance from a theoretical standpoint, grounded in empirical findings. Key themes that emerged across the presentations included whether and how disorder can be identified and deciphered, if disorder is a tool of the governed or the governing, and under what circumstances and to what degree disorder is manufactured strategically versus a natural result of ongoing power struggles. A key initial conclusion is that this is a question that is approached by different literatures that usually do not complement or talk to each other. Hence, a first conclusion is that approaching this question from a multidisciplinary perspective allows us to better comprehend the issues of complex multidimensional topics like governance.

With regards to the substantial topic of order and disorder, a key conclusion is not to dismiss disorder as an expression of chaos or an absence of governance. In fact, each of the panels showed how disorder can be a valid mechanism to undermine existing social, economic, and political orders (de Waal), a successful strategy of governance (Tapscott), a justification for decentralization or recentralization (Eaton), a technology of governance that allows for the normalization of power (Das), or a characteristic of the international system that accounts for asymmetrical levels of power (Reno).

It is also important to point out that order or disorder are not systematically used as mechanisms of governance depending on the type of actors. Lombard and Tapscott study similar actors but find different conceptions of disorder and agency. Eaton shows how order or disorder can be utilized as justification of decentralization or recentralization depending on country specific particularities. Das studies how disorder can be used as a mechanism of power that undermines the poor, but also as a mechanism of power that empowers those living ‘ordinary lives.’ Hence, the key conclusion is that it is not possible to generalize where disorder will emerge or how it will be distributed by only focusing on the governing actors.

Finally, a key finding of the seminar is that we should not be biased towards order or against disorder. A common topic through the different panels was that order or disorder should not be confused with stability and violence. Order and disorder are mechanisms through which actors exercise their authority, and should not be viewed with a normative bias. Through the seminar, we were reminded of how violence can be organized and systematic, and disorder can empower or strengthen the bargaining power of weak or



peripheral actors, and the inverse. For these reasons, it is important that when we approach the issues of governance we overcome our biases towards order or against disorder, and understand them as mechanisms that allow actors to exercise power.

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