UNEVEN MIRRORS, REALITY, AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONSCIENCE

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Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.
Attributed to Philip K. Dick

Reality is merely an illusion, although a very persistent one.
Attributed to Albert Einstein

Lord Francis Bacon, the patriarch of modern science, coined a remarkably versatile metaphor. “The human mind,” he opined, “resembles those uneven mirrors which impart their own properties to different objects, from which rays are emitted and distort and disfigure them” (Bacon, pp. 20 – 21). Read in the context he intended, this metaphor captures the essence of the modern project. Reality is an objective phenomenon emitting its own rays that we can view accurately if we are willing to polish away the imperfections of our mind mirrors. A task requiring the application of inductive logic, what we now call “scientific method,” and a bit of elbow grease. And to be fair, brightly polished mind mirrors have given us a better understanding of the world around us.

But if we tweak the metaphor a bit, it also captures the essence of the drafters’ thinking as they worked on the Constitution of 1787. Like Bacon, they assumed that most people possessed uneven mind mirrors, yet they tended to be less certain that the imperfections could be polished out. For example, Madison (p. 17) argued that the idea of correcting imperfections in mind mirrors by “giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests” was simply “impracticable.” Madison’s phrasing here is important, I think. The task was impracticable (impossible to do); not impractical (unwise to do). The goal, then, was to create a form of government that gave citizens freedom to accept distortions as reality while minimizing the problems that uneven mind mirrors might cause in their collective life.
Interestingly enough, if we tweak the metaphor yet another way, it captures the essence of the post modern condition. Once again, the primary concern is distortion produced by uneven mind mirrors. However, the post modern twist is the unsettling possibility that there really is no such thing as an even mirror, just a wide array of uneven ones. As such, following Bacon’s advice doesn’t get rid of imperfections, it just exchanges one set of “properties” for another, thereby shifting the character of our distortion. Then again, it could be (and often is) argued that the post modern condition is not real, but rather a distortion and disfigurement of reality produced by uneven mind mirrors of college professors.

If my concern was simply the question of how we, as individuals, get through our day in/day out lives, I don’t think this business of reality and mind mirrors would be all that important. At least, the daily reality I experience and my mind mirror seem to be pretty much in sync. There are exceptions now and then, some more troublesome than others, but I have yet to encounter a reality altering event. In this regard, I am going to go out on a limb and assert that I really don’t think my personal life is much different from the lives of most people in our society. This is not to say that there aren’t differences in the details of individual lives, many of which are important. Nevertheless, I think most of us confront reality as a more or less fixed phenomenon and devise strategies for dealing with it.

The subject of this essay, however, is not how individuals conduct, or should conduct, their daily lives. Instead, it is about strategies public administrators might employ for conducting their business. What makes this project tricky, of course, is that no matter how much we try to dodge the issue, a significant piece of the public administration business requires making decisions for other people. In this context, then, the issues of reality and mind mirrors becomes rather important. Whatever else might be said, this much is certainly true. The business of
public administration operates best when the mind mirrors of administrators and the public they serve are in alignment.

The easy way out of this project would be to pick one of the above metaphors and run with it. The problem with this approach, perhaps because of the specific properties of my mind mirror, is that all three metaphors strike me as being parts of the public administration puzzle. We do live in a physical world populated by objects that emit their own rays, and the way we interpret them is important. A bus will run me over if I don’t get out of its way. At the same time, should I not see the bus, it would be nice to know that the driver interprets the rays in a way that would lead her to apply the brakes. If we read Madison literally—giving everyone exactly the same opinions, etc.—he is absolutely correct. Its impracticable. Yet, our experiences throughout the 20th century offer evidence that there are technologies capable of giving large groups of people very similar opinions. Furthermore, there is also evidence that those technologies do help make the public administration business operate a bit more smoothly. Yet, our experience also suggests that the question of whether or not its impractical to give people similar values deserves serious consideration. And this brings us to the third metaphor.

The notion of post modern can be discussed in a variety of ways, of course. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the definition suggested by Fox & Miller (1995) and Spicer (2001) demonstrate why it must be part of the puzzle. A key characteristic of the post modern condition is that the grand (or meta) narratives that used to provide a foundation for authority have lost much of their former luster. One consequence of this situation is the loss of a “robust basis in shared reality from which the sovereignty of the whole people might be reasserted” (Fox & Miller, 1995, p. xiv). And in the resulting void, we confront “an extreme pluralism of often
conflicting notions about what is ‘good’ or what is ‘true’” (Spicer, 2001, p. 91). A bleak landscape indeed!

My intervention in this dialogue is rather modest. I will begin with the idea of the social construction of reality. My argument in this regard is that we still possess a shared reality but we tend to take it for granted. However, from time to time events occur that remind us both that we live in a shared reality and that it is rather important for how we understand ourselves as autonomous individuals. From there I will pose an intriguing encounter between Woodrow Wilson and Michael Spicer centered around the notion that the idea of state can form the basis for a conscience of administration. Finally, I will employ an argument developed by Aldo Leopold to suggest how all of this might be applied to the project of administration in a post modern condition.

Social Construction of Reality

*The method of political development is conservative adaptation, shaping old habits into new ones, modifying old means to accomplish new ends.*

Woodrow Wilson (1898, p. 639)

*How pervasive is the thinning of “reality”?*

Fox and Miller (1995, p. 56)

No doubt about it! Read literally, the notion of *reality* as an artifact of social construction appears to be the product of an uneven mind mirror. Yet read another way, there is actually quite a bit of empirical evidence that supports the basic concept. For example, there is an object that has a physical presence—it emits its own rays. In one society, the object is called *tree*, and in another, it is called *arbol*. This, I submit, is one facet of social construction. Reality, in this case, is not so much about the physical world as it is about creating meanings for
the physical world that have currency within the culture (language, values, beliefs, etc.) of a
given society.

There is a sense in which this example actually supports Bacon’s original metaphor. The
object emitting rays is neither tree not arbol. Both of these names are the product of uneven
mind mirrors imparting their properties (culturally relevant meanings) to the object. At the same
time, this example reveals a problem with Bacon’s metaphor. Objects don’t actually emit name
rays. They don’t need to because their other rays are quite sufficient for determining difference.
Indeed, the lack of name rays is a problem only in a relatively specific situation—when humans
want to carry on a conversation about the physical world.

Yet, even in this situation the lack of name rays is not a serious problem. As long as the
people in the conversation have a shared understanding of the names, it really doesn’t matter
what they are. But herein is an interesting question: how do we arrive at a shared understanding
of names? Viewed one way, the process does not appear to be very democratic. We are seldom
asked whether or not we agree with the names assigned to objects. Viewed another way, the
process is actually a curious mix of democratic and authoritarian impulses. To sharpen this point
a bit, let us move from the naming of objects to the phenomenon of language generally.

As any elementary school child can attest, the English language is based on a set of
complex, often confusing, rules. And as the child can also attest, those rules have a decidedly
authoritarian character. Yet, the rules of language emerge from a thoroughly democratic process.
Initially, they represent a codification of standard usage that developed before there were rules.
Moreover, as standard usage changes, even if it violates existing rules, the rules are eventually
changed. A variation of this process is definition of words in the dictionary.
The convention used for establishing the order of various definitions for a word is the frequency of use for the meanings. And an example of how this process connects to the naming of things is the word wilderness. The first definition in most contemporary dictionaries is some variation of uncultivated land left in its natural condition (a definition, it might be noted, that coincides with the Wilderness Act of 1964). In older dictionaries, the first definition was generally some variation on the theme of wasteland. The physical reality here—a portion of the natural world—remains constant, but the socially constructed meaning assigned to it changes rather dramatically.

And just what might all of this have to do with administration? Part of the answer is relatively straightforward. Administration is a name assigned to an activity that doesn’t emit much in the way of rays, and therefore, defining its properties is always a tricky business. Like a chameleon, administration tends to develop properties by absorbing rays from the reality in which it operates. What I want to suggest, then, is that in order to determine the properties of administration, we need to focus on reality. Since the meaning assigned to administration changed rather dramatically at the beginning of the 20th century, let us begin by briefly examining some characteristics of reality taking shape at that moment in history.

“America of the nineteenth century,” Robert Wiebe (1967, p. xiii) observes, “was a society of island communities.” By the early 20th century, American society was well on the way to becoming “a highly organized, technical, and centrally planned and directed social organization which could meet a complex world with efficiency and purpose” (Hays, 1975, p. 263). A driving force for this transformation was industrialization. It seems to me that two aspects of the industrial revolution are particularly important. First, industrialization emerged from an essentially non-rational process: that is, it was not an organized and directed process.
Instead, it took shape as individuals pursued diverse motives and desires utilizing new techniques provided by science. The aggregate effect of this individual activity was a fundamental reconstruction of reality in very tangible terms. Viewed in this way, the industrialization process, like language, exhibits a curious mix of democratic and authoritarian impulses. For some of the people involved, industrialization was simply an exercise of their freedom and autonomy. For others, it represented a change in reality over which they had little control. For them, the then popular slogan for evolution—‘adapt or die!’—was metaphorically, and in many cases factually, true.

Second, industrialization may have begun in a non-rational way, but sustaining it required a great deal of rational effort. And here is where administration fits into the picture. As Lowi (1979, pp. 22 – 31) argues, whatever manifestation of self-regulation that might have been at play earlier in American society gave way to widespread administration. It is important to remember that this phenomenon applied to both the public and private sectors. Thus, at the dawn of the 20th century administration assumed/was assigned (take your pick) a rather substantial task—quite literally the management of industrial reality.

A key feature of industrial reality, in turn, is interdependence in very tangible terms. This does not mean that we are robbed of our individuality. To the contrary, industrial reality affords a wide array of opportunities for us to define and express our individuality. Yet, those opportunities emerge from a rather complicated web of interdependence that is largely invisible to most of us most of the time. However, there are moments when the web becomes quite visible, reminding us of its importance to how we understand ourselves as individuals. Consider a small event that occurred in Laramie, Wyoming a few years ago.
Like many communities in the country, natural gas is a major energy source used by Laramie residents in pursuing their daily lives. Late one evening, employees of the private company that provides natural gas to Laramie set about to conduct routine maintenance checks on the supply system. Part of the routine required briefly shutting the main gas valve in order to insure that various pressure gages were functioning properly. On this particular evening, the employees shut the main valve but forgot to turn it back on. By the time they discovered their mistake, all gas lines in town had cleared, which meant all pilot lights had gone out. It also meant that resolving the problem was a bit more complicated than simply turning the main valve back on.

Indeed, it required a three phase solution. First, employees were dispatched to turn off all gas valves at the end sources (the company estimated that there were 10,000 end sources in Laramie). Once that was completed, the main valve could be turned on. Employees could then turn on the end source valves, and relight pilot lights. This part of the story demonstrates, I think, the rather important role of administration in sustaining life as the residents of Laramie know it. People do not need natural gas to carry out their lives, but once it becomes available, people adjust their lives accordingly. Stated differently, natural gas is a key structure of reality in Laramie, and in this case, the citizens woke up one morning to discover that their reality had been disrupted rather unexpectedly. What made the situation even more frustrating was that the residents were neither responsible for the disruption, nor in a position to do anything about restoring reality. All they could do is wait while administration resolved the problem it had created.

The Laramie incident was a small example, of course, but it seems to me that the aftermath of hurricane Katrina presents a much larger example of the same phenomenon.
Hurricanes are not an artifact of administration, of course, but administration did create a reality that allowed a large number of people to live fifteen feet below sea level. The flooding disrupted their immediate reality, but more important, it also disturbed the broader web of interaction that they had become dependent upon in order to pursue their individual interests and desires. There is certainly room for questioning the logic of creating a reality in which people lived below sea level, but it was created and people became dependent upon it. More important, once the reality was disrupted, the question was not whether restoring it represented a task for administration. That was taken for granted. Instead, the question was how administration should respond.

The point I’m working towards here is the notion of hyperreality as employed by Fox & Miller (1995, pp. 58 – 59). While I don’t disagree with their assessment, I think it is important to remember that beneath the hyper there is still a reality. Moreover, as my examples suggest, industrial reality is amazingly fragile. It seems to me that this point raises an important issue about democracy, one that perhaps does not receive enough attention. At least since Thomas Hobbes ventured into the state of nature, the hero of the liberal democratic narrative has been the autonomous individual. The underlying assumption is that autonomous was synonymous with independent. Against this background, industrial reality would seem to present something of a paradox—autonomy defined in terms of interdependence. By way of exploring this paradox, I want to start with the curious notion of the conscience of administration.

The Conscience of Administration

*The idea of the state and the consequent ideal of its duty are undergoing noteworthy change; and “the idea of the state is the conscience of administration.”*

Can we do without a concept of the state when (re)framing the study of public administration?

Mark Rutgers (1994, p. 396)

Just what might the concept of the idea of the state serving as the conscience of administration mean?² By way of unpacking the concept, let us start with a standard definition of conscience: “The awareness of a moral or ethical aspect to one’s conduct together with an urge to prefer right over wrong” (The American Heritage College Dictionary 1997, p. 295). The concept of conscience, then, entails two basic components. On the one hand, it requires some sort of moral code that distinguishes between right and wrong conduct. On the other hand, it also requires some process by which individuals internalize the code as a guide for their actions. As such, conscience can be read as a variation on Bacon’s metaphor.

It seems to me that this definition gives us a tentative interpretation of Wilson’s comment. If we assume that the idea of the state provides a moral code, then the project was to convince/train administrators to internalize it as a guide for their conduct. In this regard, it seems to me that Michael Spicer’s (2001) book, Public Administration and the State, can be read as a contemporary version of this formulation. Like Wilson, Spicer argues that the idea of state that underpins administrative thinking is crucial for determining what constitutes appropriate conduct. Where Spicer and Wilson part company, however, is on the question of what idea of state should be used for administrative conscience. More specifically, Spicer contends that whereas Wilson’s thinking is best situated in “purposive association” theory; contemporary administration would be better served by adopting a “civil association” theory.
Spicer offers several reason why this shift might make sense, but I think his most powerful one is this: “the pursuit of a vision of a purposive state, governed and managed by a teleocracy, may not be only impractical but also potentially harmful in light of the severe fragmentation of political culture that is characteristic of what many observers have termed the postmodern condition” (Spicer, 2001, p. 89). In short, social reality has changed on us, and therefore, we need to re-polish our mind mirrors. Yet, if my interpretation of Spicer’s view is somewhat accurate, then once again it would seem that his position parallels Wilson’s in terms of diagnosing the problem, even though they disagree on the appropriate solution.

While I agree with the general contours of Spicer’s assessment, I am a bit bothered by the options as he defines them. It strikes me that in seeking to portray purposive and civil association as opposing view, Spicer tends to present something of a Hobson’s Choice. For instance, his root definition of purposive association is an idea “in which individuals recognize themselves as united or bound together for the joint pursuit of some coherent set of substantive purposes or ends” (p. 14). He adds: “a purposive association is characteristically one that has been consciously designed, or at least consciously adapted, by some individual or group of individuals to attain a particular set of substantive purposes” (p. 15). Combined, these factors form the basis for “teleocratic government” that seeks to convince/coerce individuals to “conform their own actions and their own ends to the achievement of a common shared end or set of ends” (p. 18).

In contrast, civil association is based on the idea that “men and women see themselves as essentially free to pursue their own particular interests and values.” What joins them is “their recognition or their acknowledgement of certain rules of conduct.” It then follows that the role of government is to define “rules of conduct” that “limit individuals’ sphere of action.” And
herein is the important difference. The rules of conduct developed by government are not
dictated by some notion of substantive goals, but rather by a desire to “limit conflict between
individuals and groups and the harm that they can do to each other” (all quotes, p. 21).

My primary concern about this framework emerges from my argument about the
character of industrial reality. As I suggested above, the idea that industrial society represents a
constructed reality does not mean it is an imagined reality. To the contrary, industrial society
has very tangible structures that, to my way of thinking, muddle the boundary between purposive
and civil association. For example, industrial reality creates a situation in which individual
interests and values are interconnected in both small and broad ways, whether or not we are
conscious of it. There is a sense, then, in which industrial reality necessarily involves a wide
variety of common substantive ends and purposes, once again whether or not we are conscious of
them. If that is the case, some of the conflict, even harm, that emerges in society results from
interruptions in common goals/purposes upon which individual ends are dependent. In
consequence, the rules of conduct created by government need to be attentive to both resolving
disputes between individuals/groups, and insuring that individual action conforms to, or at least
does not disrupt, shared ends.

The possibility I want to raise, therefore, is an idea of state that falls somewhere between
purposive and civil association. An idea that is not simply a compromise between those postures
but more of a synthesis in a dialectic sense. One that recognizes the collective character of
industrial reality but envisions a role of government in more civil association, than teleocratic,
terms. This might seem to be a rather tall order, however, it is at this point that Wilson reenters
the conversation. What I want to suggest is that through a bit of archeology and reconstruction it
is possible to argue that Wilson may have outlined the general contours of just such a synthetic idea.

A Wilsonian Synthesis?

Yet must this highest individuation be joined with the greatest mutual dependence. Paradoxical though the assertion looks, the progress is at once towards complete separateness and complete union. But the separateness is of a kind consistent with the most complex combinations for fulfilling social wants; and the union is of a kind that does not hinder entire development of each personality. Civilization is evolving a state of things and a kind of character, in which two apparently conflicting requirements are reconciled.

Herbert Spencer (1851, p. 240)

The modern idea is this: the state no longer absorbs the individual; it only serves him. . .

‘The individual for the State’ has been reversed and made to read, ‘The State for the individual.’

Woodrow Wilson (1898, p. 619)

It is certainly the case that Wilson’s theoretical perspective changed over the course of his career. Yet, it would also appear that some of his thinking remained rather consistent. In the administration essay, for instance, he argued that the “functions of government” were “becoming more complex and difficult,” as well as “vastly multiplying in number” (Wilson, 1987/1887, p. 12). A situation he associated with the fact that majorities “conduct government,” and their view was “steadily widening to new conceptions of state duty.” Roughly 24 years later, during the 1912 presidential campaign, Wilson (1913, p. 47) argued that government was “a living thing. . .
It is modified by its environment, necessitated by its tasks, shaped to its functions by the sheer pressure of life.”

There is a difference in phrasing between these passages. In the earlier essay employs essentially pragmatic social concepts; and the later, organic metaphors. This shift reinforces Robert Meiwald’s (1984) argument that Wilson developed/refined his organic view of state after the publication of the administration essay. But the underlying sentiment of both passages is the same—government must be understood as a dynamic and changing force in society. Does this mean that Wilson subscribed to the notion of teleocratic government? It seems to me that the answer to this question depends on how we define teleocratic.

Spicer’s definition tends to portray government as a proactive force animated by a relatively significant amount of rational intent. Someone determines what constitutes desirable ends and then sets about to use government to accomplish them. Wilson’s comments don’t appear to fit that definition. Instead, they offer an image of government reacting to broader changes in society. Indeed, the passage from the campaign speech actually anticipates an idea generally associated with John Gaus (1947)—the “ecology of government.” A connection, it might be noted, that Gaus didn’t mention. Yet, there is another way we might define teleocratic. One based on non-rational (as opposed to irrational) intent. A clue here is that in the campaign speech, Wilson makes explicit reference to Charles Darwin. Darwin’s theory, in turn, has an implicit teleocratic accent.

On the one hand, the evolution process was not random, it had purpose—the ongoing adjustment of the relationship between organisms and their environment. However, the process was driven by a non-rational force that Darwin called “natural selection.” On the other hand, at least at one point Darwin (1979/1859, p. 459) implied that the evolutionary process also had an
end: “as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.” It is important to note that Darwin’s definition of “perfection” was situational, not universal. His point of reference was the relationship between organism and environment. A “perfect” organism was able to survive in a given environment, and extinction provided a forceful reminder that “perfection” was a transitory concept.

This definition seems closer to the image in Wilson’s comments. Government had purpose and pursued ends, but both were dictated by conditions in society. Indeed, in *The State*, Wilson (1898, p. 633) noted that the end of government was “to assist in accomplishing the objects of organized society,” adding that government actions needed “constant adjustments” as a result of the changing needs in society. It seems to me that this interpretation is also consistent with a definition of state, prefaced by a reference to Stein’s quote, in Wilson’s Johns Hopkins lecture notes (c. 1894):

The State, therefore, is an abiding natural relationship; neither a mere convenience nor a mere necessity; neither a mere voluntary association nor a mere corporation; nor any other artificial thing created for a special purpose, but the eternal, natural, embodiment and expression of a higher form of life than the individual, namely, that common life which gives leave to individual life, and opportunity for completeness,—makes individual life possible, and makes it full and complete (*Papers* 7: 124).

Whether or not Wilson’s definition is an accurate rendition of Stein’s theory (see Rutgers, 1994), it nevertheless presents an interesting set of ideas.

He portrays the state as a natural phenomenon which could be taken to imply that it possesses autonomy, and therefore, agency. Yet, his use of relationship and insistence that it is
not an artificial thing created for a special purpose suggest a different context. The state is natural in the sense that it is non-rational. Rather than a thing with a life of its own, the state is an abstraction. A way of conceptualizing in broad terms the relationships that define a nation and distinguish it from other nations. The relationships, in turn, are not rational constructions, but rather a product of the particular history and experiences of the people in the nation.

The second part of his definition is a bit tricky. He portrays the state as a “higher form of life” which once again implies that it possesses autonomy and agency. However, he then offers two similar, but not necessarily identical, expressions about the relationship between the state and individuals. In the first, the state “gives leave to individual life and opportunity for completeness;” and in the second, the state “makes individual life possible and makes it full and complete.” The first phrasing tends to portray the state as a passive agent. It provides general conditions that can be used by autonomous individuals to pursue a variety of ends. The second phrasing tends to be more proactive. More to the point, it implies that the individual is a product, or creation, of the state, not an autonomous agent. A line of Wilson’s reasoning in *The State* is helpful here.

For Wilson, a key distinction between the modern state and older forms was a change in how individuals understood themselves: “The ancient citizen’s virtues were not individual in their point of view, but social; whereas our virtues are almost entirely individual in their motive, social only in some of their results” (Wilson, 1898, p. 619). Thus, Wilson did not deny the notion of the autonomous individual. Yet, in a subsequent passage Wilson seems to move in the opposite direction: “If the name had not been restricted to a single, narrow, extreme, and radically mistaken class of thinkers, we ought all to regard ourselves and to act as socialists, believers in the wholesomeness and beneficence of the body politic” (his emphasis, p. 631). A
point he reinforces by once again noting that while the socialists’ view is mistaken, “they have right end in view: they seek to bring the individual with his special interests, personal to himself, into complete harmony with society” (p. 632).

The question here is what aspect of the socialists’ view was mistaken, and Wilson’s answer was any “scheme which involves the complete control of the individual by government” (p. 632). Wilson then proposed a “middle ground” that he believed defined an harmonious relationship among society, the individual, and government:

Government . . .is the organ of society, its only potent and universal instrument: its objects must be the objects of society. What, then, are the objects of society? What is society? It is an organic association of individuals for mutual aid. Mutual aid to what? To self-development. The hope of society lies in an infinite individual variety, in the freest possible play of individual forces . . .The case for society stands thus: the individual must be assured the best means, the best and fullest opportunities, for complete self development: in no other way can society itself gain variety and strength (p. 633).

It seems to me that embedded in this proposal is a synthesis of purposive and civil association theories. But does it offer a basis for developing an administrative conscience in a postmodern condition?

Ecological Conscience

*An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on the freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing.*

Aldo Leopold (1974/1949, p. 238)
In his now classic essay, “The Land Ethic,” Aldo Leopold complained: “Despite nearly a century of propaganda, conservation still proceeds at a snail’s pace” (p. 243). In his view, correcting this situation required an “internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions” (p. 246), organized around the principle that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (p. 262). He labeled this change in thinking an “ecological conscience.” It is important to note that Leopold’s approach was directed at changing the way people carried out their activities. For instance, Leopold offered “organic farming” as an example of how a basic human activity could be pursued with an ecological conscience. There is a sense, then, in which Leopold’s approach can be read as a variation on Wilson’s (1898, p. 639) notion of “shaping old habits into new ones.”

Leopold’s formulation was generally consistent with the dominant scientific view at the time. As Michael Barbour (1995, p. 234) explains, this view assumed “that groups of species living together in a given habitat were highly organized into natural, integrated units called communities.” As such, the communities had purpose in terms of interdependent relationships among the various members, but they were not specifically teleological. Moreover, the interdependent relationships were a mix of competition and cooperation. It might be noted that while this view represented the dominant scientific interpretation, there were others in the scientific community that criticized it as “constructs of human thought.” Thus, the social construction of reality would seem to be a phenomenon even within the scientific community.

What I want to suggest, however, is that the idea of integrated biotic community is analogous to Wilson’s idea of state and it expresses the basic structure of industrial reality. In consequence, Leopold’s notion of ecological conscience might provide a metaphor for
administrative conscience in a post modern condition. The substantive purpose or goal for administration is maintaining the stability and integrity of industrial reality. The logic behind this goal is not an implicit judgment that industrial reality represents the pinnacle of human development, but rather a more pragmatic recognition that it represents the reality to which most of us have adapted. It is, therefore, in our individual and collective benefit to minimize disruptions in our reality. At the same time, this approach provides a way to navigate the extreme pluralism of the post modern era. Stated differently, a focus on maintaining the stability and integrity of reality as we know it offers a way to navigate the web of competing individual claims and values.

I want to be very clear here. Navigating competing claims is not necessarily the same as resolving them. Nevertheless, having a point of reference would help to get beyond the ‘yes it is/no it isn’t’ character of many political arguments. The operative question in disputes would be separating claims that tend to help maintain reality from claims that tend to disrupt it. For example, a claim to ban automobiles as a way to reduce air pollution tends to disrupt reality; whereas reducing auto emissions or developing alternative technologies tends to help maintain reality. Viewed in this way, then, using reality as a basis for administrative conscience is rather similar to the discourse warrants idea proposed by Fox & Miller (1995). Furthermore, it also provides a way to bring a bit of structure, without teleological implications, to the political discourse in Spicer’s (2001) civil association approach.

Conclusion

Earlier I suggested that my intervention in this dialogue would be a modest one. Uneven mind mirrors and constructed reality are troublesome concepts, but my intent has been to demonstrate that they need not be threatening. At this moment in history we all exist in
industrial reality. The fact that most of the time we take that reality for granted could be listed as
evidence that administration was rather successful in carrying out the task it assumed/was
assigned at the beginning of the 20th century. Maintaining the stability of the reality remains an
important goal for administration. Yet, maintaining reality does not mean that administration
needs to be an intrusive force in our lives. Roughly 5000 people stranded at Denver
International Airport over the recent holiday season had a practical lesson in both how fragile
industrial reality actually is, and how useful administration is in restoring reality.


2 Although Wilson does not provide a footnote for the passage, his lecture notes from Johns Hopkins (c. 1891 –
1893) contain the following notation: “(‘Die Idee des Staats ist das Gewissen der Verwaltung’—Stein).” Thus,
Wilson was employing a concept borrowed from Lorenz Von Stein (Papers 7:124).