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Abstract

Most administrative theory addresses how to make practice effective by means of abstract concepts: laws, regulations, and theories. Recent history is littered with examples of government's failure—despite plans and protocols—to cope with disastrous events, calling into question continuing pursuit of a fit between practices and abstract concepts. A closer look at situational action itself may be warranted on both technical and political grounds. The case of federal government administration of the public domain in the early 19th century reveals interpretation and discretionary action on the part of field personnel involved in land survey and sales, and clarifies the relationship between concepts and actions in administrative situations. The author argues that the experiential expertise developed in practice is not only an important coping resource but also supports democratic administration.

Keywords

administrative discretion, public domain, practical experience, democratic administration

The problem of administration is typically seen as making practice conform to models of how it should go—ideas couched in laws, regulations, organization

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protocols, orders, and theories. Virtually all these abstractions originate far from the field of action, in legislatures, courts, universities, or in the upper reaches of organizational hierarchies. The disconnect between ideas and concrete actions is usually viewed as a problem requiring better control from the top: either technical, as in finding the right method, or human, as in getting people to do what plans and protocols say they should.

Recent years have witnessed a number of disastrous events in which accepted conceptual models, strategic plans, or managerial protocols failed to serve as effective guides to action. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the record-breaking oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 come to mind. In these examples, government agencies charged with operations oversight, emergency preparedness, and disaster response had developed and implemented strategic plans that proved, in the event, to be inadequate to stave off catastrophic impact and to mobilize effective coping and remediation. Such events are different from day-to-day administration, however, in degree rather than in kind. The gap between abstract concepts and practical administrative dynamics remains a distinctive feature of governance (see, for example, the work on street-level bureaucrats; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Because the impact of abstract ideas on concrete situations has at best a rather spotty track record, what if we were to look more closely at administrative situations, as people act in and make sense of them, as at least an underused source of workable insights? My interest in situational action is twofold. For one thing, coping in the moment draws from a well of experience-based expertise the efficacy of which has been shown to far exceed that which is made possible by purely analytic deliberation (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). This suggests the need to pay attention to the in-the-moment details of how people in problem situations go about dealing with them. However, beyond the issue of effectiveness is a second consideration: the political implications of technical expertise in a democratic polity. Despite long-standing efforts to paint expertise as politically neutral, its power is not only technically instrumental but also serves to keep the reins of control in the hands of experts (Follett, 1924; see also Stivers, 2010). It is possible that deeper reflection on the issue of expertise, and a broadened understanding of what constitutes it, may point the way toward a similar expansion in our understanding of democratic administration.

This article takes aim at the problem of administration, the gap between ideas and action, as it reveals itself in the interplay between analytic reason and concrete actions in federal government administration of the public domain. The argument focuses on government efforts early in the 19th century to rationalize the public domain by means of the cadastral survey and a network

of territorial land sales offices. These efforts aimed to position the experiences, lives, and fortunes of individuals and populations on a grid of measurements. But history suggests that people's actions had as much impact on abstract systems such as the land grid as did abstractions on individuals and populations. I want to suggest that in administration, the relationship between ideas and actions is recursive. Conceptual structures and situational actions shape each other, and in fact, administration itself may be thought of as a process in which this mutual shaping takes place. Effective coping and democratic administration are served by maintaining a balance in this dynamic.

To present the relationship between ideas and actions as both mutual and dynamic, I use the notion of "action at a distance" (Latour, 1986) to articulate the process by which the two are connected in the case under study. Latour (1986) argues that achieving long-distance control, such as between a central entity and its field agents, is a problem of connecting representations of reality (inscriptions) with their remote referents. Distance provides the basis for distinguishing between abstract knowledge and concrete practice. As Robson (1992) puts it,

If knowledge is oriented towards acting upon a remote setting, then it is produced and sustained not by "true" correspondence but by its power in securing long-distance control . . . [Written] inscriptions provide a means of distancing oneself from the actions that they enable. (p. 691)

I make critical use of Latour's (1986) theory in the following argument by emphasizing not so much the power inscriptions exert (which is Latour's point) but the gap that remains between ideas and actions despite efforts to close it.

By raising our awareness of how ideas fall short of controlling actions in a field, we make room in our understanding of administration for the kind of experiential knowledge that exceeds and escapes our best efforts to formalize and control it. This is so because concepts never fully capture and contain the interwoven actions and reflections of people in a situation. Nor do conceptual limits fully close off the emergence of actions that escape them. This disconnect, which I believe is fundamental, is what makes human action, as such, the source of political freedom. It does so by maintaining the limitlessness of action in the face of all sorts of conceptually based efforts (such as ideologies, "truths," doctrines, and prescriptions) to set impenetrable boundaries around it. My argument, then, is that the limits of democracy—of the capacity of members of a polity to act in ways they have defined themselves—as they are enacted

in administrative situations are permeable. The essay focuses on the early 19th century, early in the rise of the bureaucratic administrative state, to reveal the existence of “administration” in fundamental form. Stripping away structural accretions makes it possible to consider administration at the bare, phenomenal level, where its resistance to full conceptual specification shows itself more clearly.

The “Stateless” 19th Century

The conventional narrative of American political development holds that up to the late 19th century—the onset of industrialization, urbanization, and the close of the frontier—the American polity was notable for its sense of statelessness. Government is said to have functioned imperceptibly, as Alexis de Tocqueville (1945, p. 73) observes, “Although everything moves regularly, the mover can nowhere be discovered. The hand that directs the social machine is invisible” (p. 59). With the rise of popular sovereignty, America could fairly be said to govern itself, “so feeble and so restricted is the share left to the administration.”

The written history of American administration up to the 1870s replicates this image. The narrative makes the space of early 19th century governance appear vacant, the better to cast it as the backdrop against which the eventual rise of the bureaucratic administrative state shows up in bold contrast (e.g., Skowronek, 1982).¹ But the neatness of the account neglects administrative actions and practices that, recovered and reconsidered, show efforts at centralized control over a field of action. These efforts, though not bureaucratic in the contemporary sense, still displayed forms of rationality, and resistance to it, that (almost literally) laid the groundwork for what came later.

At the beginning of the federal government’s attempt to rationalize the public domain, the land in question was—from the point of view of the central government—a near total wilderness, occupied only by Indian tribes, scouts, and occasional units of the army. Exploration, mapping, and surveying transformed it from a vacant space, perceived as a near void, to a territory, positively conceived and bounded, on which the sovereignty of the government could be exercised. The first assertion of federal governance of the public domain consisted of mapping the territory; laying out a land grid; noting mineral, timber, and other resources; and putting a land sales system in place to encourage settlement, commodify the land, and exert discipline on a growing population. The significance of this activity for understanding the development of governance is that it put in place the rational foundations on which further

bureaucratization occurred. At the same time, surveying and measuring revealed their own limits as foundations. The origin of the familiar pyramid of bureaucracy is a largely unnoticed grid that created “state space. Movement in it is confined as by gravity to a horizontal plane, and limited by the order of that plane to preset paths between fixed and identifiable points” (Massumi, 1992, p. 6). The story of early 19th century governance is, in part, a story of the state’s efforts to realize this conceptual model of its space and the human actions that employed, resisted, and were shaped by this rationalization project.

Survey and Sales

In colonial times, property in land was defined by tangible features, like mounds of earth, blazes on tree trunks, and scratches on boulders. Often property lines followed the contours of the landscape, and each piece of land was measured as boundaries were needed. This system, known as “metes and bounds,” was complex and poorly documented, and land disputes were common, favoring those who had the means to hire lawyers. Huge tracts ended up in the hands of absentee owners or rich occupants. At the end of the Revolutionary War, the new government was faced with how to handle the public domain now under its jurisdiction. During the colonial period, laws had prohibited (though not prevented) the settlement of land west of a line of demarcation that ran down the spine of the Appalachian range; Indian tribes had been better at enforcing this stricture than the British Empire. Now, new rules were needed to govern settlement of the trans-Appalachian area. Settlers were not waiting for these rules to be drawn up, and the urgency of the matter was heightened by an enormous war debt and the lure of potential government revenue from the sale of land (Linklater, 2002).

In 1784, Thomas Jefferson chaired a committee on the matter established by the Confederation Congress. “To Jefferson, . . . the possession of land was the Newtonian principle that made a democratic society work” (Linklater, 2002, p. 57). To hinder speculators from grabbing all the best land, the committee rejected the complicated metes and bounds system. Instead, the government was to get the Indian tribes to cede their land, which before it could be settled would be surveyed and divided into 36 square mile townships. Some townships would be subdivided into 1-square mile sections so that buyers of modest means were not priced out of the system. No land would be left unsurveyed. Land purchase would be handled by auction, and a land sales office would be set up in each territory. The surveyors were also to note significant features in the various lots, such as salt licks, mineral deposits, mountains, soil

quality, timber, and so on. Jefferson saw the partitioning of the land into equal-size sections and townships as the structural framework within which smallholder democracy could coalesce. But what ended up driving the system was the government's dire need for money. Rationalizing the land would more easily turn it into a commodity than into the foundation for democracy.

The resulting ordinance became law on May 20, 1785. A geographer was appointed by the president to administer the survey and land sales; he or she in turn was to appoint a surveyor from each state. Once the first seven ranges west of the base line (at today's Ohio–Pennsylvania border) were platted, land sales could begin. So urgent was the need for revenue that when the first four ranges were completed in February 1787, Congress authorized land sales to begin. More than 72,000 acres were auctioned off for the sum of US\$117,108 (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 11). No entire townships were sold, and the volume of sales was considered disappointing. Speculators pressed Congress to permit larger tracts to be sold to groups of capitalists. The first such sale (to the Ohio Company of Associates) divested the government of one million acres at a price of less than 10 cents an acre, a rank bargain even for those times. The system envisioned in the 1785 law lapsed into disuse.

The new federal government took office in 1789, and the “task of making a suitable policy for the distribution of the public domain . . . merged with the greater problem of creating an administrative mechanism” (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 12). The survey and sale of land found a home in the Treasury Department, where Alexander Hamilton gave preference to sales to wealthy buyers, viewing the public domain as a revenue source rather than as a potential framework for agrarian democracy. Yet people of modest means continued to have an active interest in acquiring land.

As Leonard D. White (1948) notes, “Nowhere in the history of the world had a republican government undertaken to organize so vast an area” (p. 11). The importance of the Treasury Department cannot be overestimated. Through its customs service, bank, excise officers, land agents, and post offices, it touched virtually everyone in the nation. White points out that the challenge in field services is for the central office to ensure that policies (i.e., controlling ideas) are consistently applied and to maintain close relationships between the center and the periphery. A field office reports to the center, but “it is not a robot, for it must possess some discretion” (p. 199)—hence the ensuing dynamic between conceptual framework and concrete actions. By 1801, there were 3,000 federal employees, all but 150 of whom were in the field. Operations at a distance, therefore, were the overwhelming mode of U.S. governance during this period.

The Grid

The rectangular grid measured out by the surveyors amounted to an effort to impress a concept on the surface of the land. The fact that boundaries were laid out in intersecting straight lines and equal-size parcels made a big difference in the way land settlement unfolded, in comparison to the variously shaped parcels and overlapping claims produced by the metes and bounds system. For one thing, the grid almost surely reduced the number of boundary disputes, lawsuits, and feuds. By controlling the shape and size of crop fields, it had a lasting influence on farming practices, as anyone knows who has gazed down from an airplane at the visible checkerboard in the country's unforested midsection. Roads were laid out along township and section lines, often making right-angle turns where, to a city dweller, there was no apparent reason to do so. The boundaries of election districts and school districts conformed to the grid.

But it was the ideas embodied in the grid that were the source of real power. Any grid asserts authority over space itself; it treats space as empty, abstract, and therefore subject to interpretation by a conceptual scheme, such as the logic of property; it enframes the world within which human practices unfold. The resulting land system defines where people can and cannot go, and who has the right to the use of particular lots. It disciplines the way people think about themselves: as land owners, travelers, farmers, elected officials, administrators, and so on. It applies "a ruler to space," in every sense (Fox, 2000, p. 129; see also Blomley, 2003; Carstensen, 1962; Linklater, 2002). The land grid territorialized: it made boundaries; it created borders and frontiers; in most American minds it divided between the civilized and the savage, the wild. It made fences necessary. So, even though, as Abraham Lincoln once said, boundaries are "merely surveyor's lines, over which people may walk back and forth without any consciousness of their presence" (Johnson, 1976, p. 127) the grid, unnoticed, shaped their movements, their practices, their sense of themselves, serving as a "[form] of rationality that organizes their way of doing things" (Foucault, 1984, p. 48). In other words, the grid was invisible but far from feeble.

The Work of the Land Surveyors

In 1812, a General Land Office was established in the Treasury Department, with 18 district offices. A principal clerk in Washington, D.C., supervised surveyors general in each district, who in turn oversaw the work of contracted deputy surveyors; they in turn hired assistants to help them do the actual

fieldwork. Out of the contracts, deputies had to pay their assistants and buy supplies and equipment. It was a complicated and uncertain enterprise. One deputy in Saginaw Bay wrote to his surveyor general in Cincinnati in 1837 as follows:

We have to give for flour \$15 per barrel, and for pork, and that of an inferior quality, \$33 per barrel . . . Do not fail to supply us immediately with money, for we are not, by any means, in an enviable position; in a strange land, among strangers, 1,000 miles from home, without money, and out of provisions. (Agnew, 1941, pp. 371-372)

Surveying parties had to carry with them not only food but also bedding, tents, cooking utensils, needles and thread as well, of course, as their surveying instruments (compass, chain, tally pins, marking tools, field books, writing paper, ink and pens, and so on).

The actual process of “running lines” was fraught with difficulty. Measuring was done by means of a 20 two-foot chain. One man stood by the starting stake while another walked with the other end of the chain toward a mark identified by a compass bearing. At that point, another stake was inserted, the rear chainman walked forward, and the process was repeated. The chainmen were accompanied by axmen who chopped away at trees and bushes so that the line could be straight (Linklater, 2002). Even under ideal conditions, this would have been an arduous exercise, but conditions were never ideal. The weather was often terrible, either hot and muggy or freezing cold. The men were tormented by mosquitoes and flies, or they shivered and got chilblains. Often when they reached the supposed starting point for the season, the wooden stake had disappeared. They thrashed through nearly impenetrable brush or swamps. Near rivers, they often had to wait until spring floods subsided enough to make walking possible; sometimes this did not happen until August or early September. In 1817, Edward Tiffin, first commissioner of the General Land Office, wrote,

None but Men as hard as a Savage who is always at Home in Woods & Swamps can live upon what they afford (if occasions so require) who can travel for Days up to the knees in mud & mire, can drink any fluid he finds while he is drenched with water also—and has a knowledge of the lands who are equally patient and persevering under similar hardships can make anything by surveying the kind of Country we have to survey. (quoted in Rohrbough, 1968, p. 101)

These conditions produced measurements—and eventually plats—that lacked perfect correspondence to the concept, to say the least. Nonetheless, once a plat was drawn up and signed, deviations were thereafter enshrined in law. When errors were found by subsequent surveys, they were to be noted but not corrected, and boundaries of townships and sections were not to be changed.

The inaccuracies of measurement, the difficulties of life in the field, and the ruggedness of the land itself set at odds the abstract idea of laying a grid over featureless, “virgin” land—which actually was not virgin, as it had been occupied for generations by Indian tribes. In practice, abstractions had to give way, in varying degrees, to actual circumstances and conditions. Yet the grid was a powerful idea; its power is attested to not least by its longevity. Never confronted was the contradiction that lay in its origin, between Jefferson’s goal of facilitating smallholder democracy and Hamilton’s interest, shared by investors and the government alike, in commodifying the public domain. As White (1948) notes, the original system of direct sales from government to individual buyer was “broken into” by large sales to speculators, which speeded and enlarged the flow of money into government coffers (pp. 382–383).

The Land Office Business

The first land offices were created in 1796. The Treasury Department oversaw them, but the War Department negotiated treaties with Indian tribes to cede their lands, and titles were issued by the State Department and signed by the president. In 1812, the General Land Office consolidated these functions. “The requirement that Indian title be extinguished before the lands be surveyed, and . . . that they be offered for sale at land offices established in the districts—these and other regulations required much tedious administrative work” (Carstensen, 1962, p. xxiii). Negotiators had to be found and trained, treaties had to be approved by the Senate and the president, deputy surveyors had to be contracted with, they had to find assistants to do the actual survey work, the land offices had to be staffed, auctions had to be conducted, and payments had to be received and forwarded to Washington. These were tall orders when standard procedures did not exist, physical and administrative terrain were poorly defined, and previous experience was fragmentary or nonexistent.

The typical land auction attracted a great deal of interest on the part of individual settlers and speculators. Once a sale was formally announced, men wandered in and out of the office hoping for information about where the best

tracts were. No one knew much about the territory except the surveyors and others who had access to the plats. In practice, surveyors knew a lot about the land they had tramped over and could identify likely sites for mills or towns. "They knew where springs were located, where drainage was good, where a bench or terrace showed no flood marks" (Johnson, 1976, p. 129). When particular pieces of land were called out, men weighed whether to bid and risk starting a competition or to hang back and hope to pay a lower price. Individuals were far from being in equally powerful positions. Some were rich, others were poor; some were influential, others were not. "While the mass of citizens formed outside the office door, a man of influence went in the back door with letters of introduction" (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 298)

The intended system of auction sales, based on open competition for tracts and the highest possible profit to the government, did not work in practice. Control became more and more difficult as the volume of sales increased. In many cases, whether because settlers had arrived before the surveyors or because the process was so slow, settlers did not wait until the plats had been registered in Washington; they simply squatted on the land. Squatters, small purchasers, and speculators alike colluded to restrict competition (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 46), and squatters pressured the government to accept their occupancy as a *fait accompli*, which eventually, in many cases, it did.

District land offices labored under vague instructions, inadequate resources, low pay, long hours, and frequent personal abuse from locals. A register was in charge of plats, whereas a receiver took in payments. Early on, a credit system was established, so buyers could pay very small amounts at a time, each of which had to be kept track of, and the interest on the balance recalculated. Payments might be given in specie, bank notes, or certificates of credit. If the receiver made a mistake (such as failing to recognize counterfeit tender), he or she had to make it good out of his own pocket. If he or she sent bills through the mail he or she had to cut them in half and send each half separately. Specie created its own problems. One payment amounting to US\$150,000 weighed four tons and required an equal number of wagons and several guards.

Land offices were inspected frequently, usually by members of Congress or territorial officers who happened to be in the vicinity, often by important local citizens.

Yet the Secretary, the land officers, and the inspectors were often political allies. Land officers were powerful men. Their great distance from Washington and their removal from [the Secretary's] close observation and advice increased their independence . . . The inspectors were often

friends, neighbors, business partners, and political allies of the land officers. Nevertheless, their reports disclosed maladministration, extended absences, and occasional examples of financial mismanagement. (Rohrbough, 1968, pp. 33-34)

The huge volume of business produced a disconnect between the way land office administration was supposed to go in theory and the way it actually did go. Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin approached administration with strict efficiency as a high goal. He saw to it that land office staffing remained at a bare-bones level even as sales ballooned. The result was massive failure to keep up with the paperwork, thus bogging down the whole process. As early as 1801, the surveyor general noted that his deputies had forward more than 13,000 miles of field notes to his office, only a small fraction of which had been transcribed into plats and sent to the Treasury Department and district land offices (Rohrbough, 1968).

Under such conditions, the exercise of administrative discretion was not only unavoidable but also constitutive. Discretionary actions moved into an administrative vacuum just as the grid had been laid down on what everyone but the Indians considered vacant space. The difference was that the grid was a conceptual ordering of space, whereas administrative discretion created a flow of interwoven interpretations that constituted governance as a living process—a practice. There was no precedent for many of the actions that had to be taken, whether at the center or at the periphery, nor for ways to connect the field with the central office in Washington. People made it up as they went along, against the structure of the grid, and within (or usually within) the boundaries of written laws, regulations, and orders from the center—what Tocqueville (1945) calls “grammatical forms” that “all persons must have recourse to” and likened to the authority without which communities are not viable (p. 73). However, conceptual boundaries are not unarguable; they are subject to contextual interpretation. “Gradually administrators came to exercise a decisive influence” (decisive but far from determinative) “on the conditions and circumstances under which land passed from the government to the citizens. Their authority developed from their interpretations of the various acts of Congress relative to the public domain.” (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 295) It was therefore based in the experiential expertise they accumulated in making countless constitutive interpretations.

All of this gradual shaping of governance took place within ambiguous contexts. The ambiguity stemmed not only from the initial structurelessness of the territory itself, which the grid was intended to correct, but also from a

general attitude among people in the territories, that the land was not mainly a source of government revenue; it was up for grabs and the government's job was to see that it was distributed quickly. When the goal of many was to accumulate a fortune in land, the speculator was not the object of citizen ire, the government was.

To engage in unethical practices with a neighbor in connection with land use was to provoke physical violence; to use unscrupulous devices in acquiring the public domain from the federal government was only to take what rightfully belonged to the citizens of the nation. (Rohrbough, 1968, p. 292)

From the point of view of governance, the population was almost literally unruly, and imposing order was therefore an equivocal enterprise but one perceived as necessary by all parties, because, as Tocqueville (1945) observes, the alternative to the authority provided by the grammar of the law was anarchy. Administrators in local situations did the speaking this grammar helped to structure but which it could not fully confine.

The story of the measurement and commodification of the public domain shows, first, how accounts that treat the early 19th century United States as "stateless" are exaggerated. True, until the surveyors got hold of it, the terrain itself was unformed in the eyes of citizens and officials alike. Until the survey claimed it, explored it, and measured it, the "West" (that is, the public domain) existed mainly in the minds of Americans as symbol and myth—as potential, as destiny, but vital for that reason to the development of the state. As Henry Nash Smith has written about the Lewis and Clark expedition, the importance of the West lay "on the level of imagination: "[I]t was drama, it was the enactment of a myth that embodied the future. It gave tangible substance to what had been merely an idea" (Smith, 1950/1970, p. 17).

If the public domain had not existed in the American collective imagination as the West, the imposition of structure on the actual terrain could hardly have taken place. However, structure carries its own intellectual power with it. As Smith (1950/1970) points out, the West as symbol and myth was an agrarian vision. It was more Jeffersonian than Hamiltonian: "A system which revolved about a half-mystical conception of nature and held up as an ideal a rudimentary type of agriculture was powerless to confront issues arising from the advance of technology" (p. 259)—which of course was also the advance of capitalism. Statelessness gave way very quickly under pressure to impose the conceptual structure that would transform the land into a commodity.² Administrators and technicians who occupied the newly acquired territory—the surveyors, the registers of bids, the receivers of payments—embodied the

state in the eyes of local citizens and probably to varying degrees in their own. If citizens had not understood them to be “the state,” and themselves to be under its authority, they would neither have thronged land sales offices nor disputed the power of administrators to say who could buy what piece of land and for what price. Citizens in the early 19th century West would not have called it stateless. By acknowledging the existence of a duty to obey the law, even when they disputed it, they participated in constituting the state’s governance capacity.

An equally important aspect of the story of the public domain is what it reveals about the interrelationship between abstract rules and concepts imposed by the state and the web of practices on the ground. As James C. Scott (1998) puts it,

Formal order . . . is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognize, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain. (p. 310)

Structures, whether institutional or cognitive, remain notional until actions enable them to spring to life. The land grid was entirely conceptual until teams of surveyors went out on the land to struggle with balky equipment, bad weather, and the day-to-day effort to lay straight lines across bumpy, swampy, forested ground. Sales of public land according to law made similar kinds of adjustments to local conditions: crowds, squatters, preexisting claims, paperwork backlogs, and the need to invent record keeping and accounting practices. In both cases, the implementation of structure required the kind of local knowledge and expertise that are acquired in practice and resist formalization across many situations. Structure, in fact, develops gradually as an outgrowth of patterns of practice, a process Giddens (1984) terms “structuration.” Once established, it extends in time and space beyond any particular action situation, escapes the full control of actors, and simultaneously serves as conceptual resource and source of rules of appropriate action that shape situations going forward. At the same time, its capture of situations is never complete, as we will see. Situations are constituted partly by present actions and partly by structures that grew out of past actions.

Action at a Distance

In action situations, such as the land survey and sales, the relationship between conceptual structures and contingent human practices is dynamic. Social theory has tended to reduce “the complexity of action situations to a set of

manageable abstractions” (Reddy, 2001, p. 10). Philosophy has no shortage of conceptual schemes for interpreting human action, but all concepts reduce action, not as far as a set of PowerPoint bullets but in the same direction. One source of resistance to this reductionism is history but not history in the abstract—rather, history as lived experience, the kind of history we experience directly and hear in (for example) stories that those who are engaged in similar practices tell each other (Hummel, 1991). As Eugene Gendlin (1973) observes, “We cannot study experience as it is when it is not studied; we cannot state it as it is when it is not being stated. What we can do is to study it in the process of being stated” (p. 291). That which can be stated becomes the main source of the patterns practices take on, as people try to learn from their experience and the experiences of others. That part of experience that cannot be put into words is the remainder that keeps structures from achieving complete closure—that distinguishes administrative expertise from the rote application of rules and techniques.

Reductionism is to be avoided as much as possible if what we want is to test our conceptual and political limits, to move beyond the taken for granted, and to find, in what is given to us as necessary, that which is contingent and therefore can be changed. This is because concepts focus our attention on the same, on factors that can be extracted from multiple situations and expressed as “laws,” rather than on difference, on factors unique to each situation. Although we can, and usually must (if we are to live with others), constitute and interpret our experiences in language, and “study them as they are stated,” no interpretation is ever definitive, either complete or final. There is always more to say—but this more never gets to the end. As Hans-Georg Gadamer (2000) says, “The person who is situated and acts in history continually experiences the fact that nothing returns.” (p. 351). We act into an open horizon. This is a plus, if what we want is awareness of the openness that enables us to breach our limits, to engage in the work of freedom—and therefore to make a space for democracy.

Reddy’s (2001) discussion of action emphasizes its irreducible features and the way thinking and talking about action situations radically simplifies them. This happens, notably, when we begin to theorize—when post hoc interpretations of actions are mobilized as evidence for abstractions. For example, any statement in which someone gives a reason for some action of theirs is misleading because “we do not go somewhere outside of action situations, decide on a single end to pursue, then return to the real world and start determining what to do” (p. 16). We are always already in situations, and they do not become *situations* until we begin to act and speak in such a way as to

constitute them as such. This is the power of Mary Follett's (1925/1977) notion of taking orders from the situation: She is not telling us to stand back and listen to a disembodied voice from objective reality. She is urging us to act and see what comes back, or, in Dewey's (1919/1998) terms, to find out what the world will stand for by engaging with it.

With this understanding of action in mind—its indeterminate yet constitutive quality—let us reflect on how actions in the settings occupied by (organized around) the survey teams and land offices became linked to the government in Washington, D.C. Here we are dealing with what Latour (1986) calls "action at a distance." The issue is how actions in one context influence, or are influenced by, actions in another. The vehicle for action at a distance is writings, numbers, lists, and tables—that is, representation by means of inscription.

As Keith Robson (1992) points out, if what you are taking action about is right there where you are, your action is not completely dependent on linguistic or numerical representation of the setting. You are in it, you can see, hear, smell, and touch elements in it. You have accumulated a store of tacit knowledge, part of which you share with others. All these elements are unmediated resources for action—directly, rather than at a distance. For example, surveyors in the field found it necessary, in order to lay an abstract grid on the land, to cope with rugged terrain, trees and boulders in the way, swamps and rivers they could not cross, heat, cold, hunger, and so on. They coped by means of the experience they built up in the setting, taking actions from minute to minute that addressed the issue of "how do we plot a straight line?" by coming as close as they believed they could and developing a feel for the fit between the orders that they had been given and what the surroundings would put up with—for the kinds of compromises they (and the distant people they worked for) could live with and those they could not. Then they faced the issue of how to convey their work to distant others. As Latour (1986) puts it, this is an issue of how to translate practices into knowledge by representing them in writing, graphs, maps, numerical data, and so on.

In the distant capital, officials confronted the same issue but reversed. How were they to ensure that what surveyors and land officers did conformed to the policies they set? From the perspective at the center, action at a distance entails not just physical separation between one context and another but the aim of influencing many contexts at the same time. Center people focus on what is the same, on factors applied to many situations. We could think of this as an issue of how to translate abstract knowledge into practices, that is, how to get people in the field to see it the way center people want them to, how to get them to carry the prescribed conceptual framework with them into the field

and act according to it. This is a problem for the conceptualizers because their knowledge is theoretical rather than situational, less so for people in field situations, where experiencing and conceptualizing are blended in practical action.

Action at a distance, therefore, is marked by constant effort, on one end, to muddle through—to achieve a reasonable fit between the ideal and the possible—and at the other, to maintain control. This does not sound unfamiliar to anyone who has thought about the problem of administration. The catch here is that transmitting the substance of what you are doing in the field to a distant center (cross-country or cross-town) necessitates relying on language and numbers—that is, on abstractions, on representations. Lost are the direct experiential knowledge (the “feeling for the organism”; Fox-Keller, 1983) on which people in the field rely, and the felt open-endedness of the situations they cope with and thereby shape. So the inscriptions that travel from the field to the center have reduced lived experience to (some of) the elements that can be represented, whereas the inscriptions that travel from the center to the field have the purpose of organizing the attention of field people so that they see the world in the prescribed terms.

Latour (1986) argues that action at a distance involves not just inscription but a cascade of “simpler and simpler inscriptions” (that is, a continuing process of reduction) “that mobilize larger and larger numbers of events in one spot” to produce the definitive interpretation (p. 18). Written inscriptions serve the needs and interests of the conceptualizers at the center much better than they do the surveyors and administrators in the field because concepts can be inscribed and action situations cannot, at least not definitively. Inscriptions are mobile, their scale can be changed at will (compare this with a plot of land), they can be reproduced and distributed, they can be shuffled and recombined, and you can superimpose one on another. In the face of this, what power does any particular action situation have, such as the experience of thrashing through a swamp, tormented by mosquitoes?³

Well, actually, it does have some because every action situation exceeds whatever can be said about it, and the experiential expertise that comes out of it eludes conceptual control. This is fortunate because otherwise everyone in every “field” would be at the mercy of the conceptualizers in their remote offices. In this sense, experiential expertise is a source of freedom, by making it possible for people in a field to shape their own understanding—not totally but to a significant extent. Latour, the originator of “action at a distance,” underplays this, in my view; he sees inscriptions as instruments of domination, which, of course, they are. Writing in this vein (see also Preston, 2006; Robson, 1992) tends to focus on power/knowledge in the hands of those who

want to impose order on a remote setting. It underplays the power/knowledge possessed by those in the setting, whose actions are partly but never completely shaped by the concepts in the inscriptions they receive from the center and whose representations are never the final word on what they have said and done in the field but only what they are willing and able to say the situation has meant to them so far. Remote settings are never just acted on by means of inscriptions; they are scenes of direct experience by actors on-site. Understanding the dynamics of governance, then, entails not just understanding “seeing like a state,” (Scott, 1998) as happens when the center lays a grid over the land to transform it to parcels of property. It also entails understanding the field’s constitutive resistance to abstraction, which not only makes it possible for the new to appear but also in fact has no choice but to do so, given that inscriptions must always fail to achieve complete representation and therefore complete control.

In the field of public administration, working on the limits of democracy includes paying attention to both sides of this dynamic. Government responses to disasters like the Gulf oil spill and Hurricane Katrina reveal vividly the yawning gap between the ideas—laws, plans, theories, and orders—the center attempts to mobilize and the practical experience shared among workers and citizens in the field. But disasters may be different only in degree, not in kind, from day-to-day administration of the complex endeavors of which modern states are supposed to be capable. From the center’s point of view, no one in the field has any ideas. From the field’s point of view, no one at the center understands the situation. At a minimum, it appears that paying more attention to the day-to-day coping strategies of field personnel might temper the relentless search for central control as well as reduce the need for it. A focus on this form of knowledge would reveal that much of its expertise consists of an only partly formalizable feel for concrete situations that develops after countless experiences. It might be that the most effective control over administrative processes begins with acknowledging the impossibility of closing the gap between idea and action.

Scholarship has made a place for itself by inscribing, abstracting, and representing—often by laying a quantitative grid on the world of practice to make that which can be coded show itself. So far, our theories have not produced the top-down control said to be the key to effective action. Can we recognize that this sort of control has both constitutive limits and political shortcomings? Can we explore the possibility of another kind of control, one that takes its orders from the situation? Can we pay attention to actions that enable the visualization and expression of the contingent, the arbitrary, and the particular? Can we study practices that let freedom—beyond the limits

of abstraction—appear? We must, for otherwise we have no answer to a crucial question: “How can the growth of capabilities [that is, expertise] be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?” (Foucault, 1984, p. 68)

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Notes

1. Rockwell (2010) presents a devastatingly effective critique of this conventional wisdom.
2. This does not mean that structure wiped out myth in the American imagination. To the contrary, the two entered into the same sort of recursive relationship I have argued structure and practices have. See Wallace Stegner (1982) for a compelling argument that the development of the West was warped by the agrarian myth that refused to come to terms with physical realities such as lack of rain and limited alternative water resources, which made the division of land into squares of equal size hopelessly inappropriate.
3. One cannot help thinking here of the PowerPoint slide on the front page of the *New York Times* purporting to represent the situation in Afghanistan with a diagram resembling a bowl of spaghetti. Looking at it, General Stanley A. McChrystal, the leader of U. S. and NATO forces there, commented, “When we understand that slide, we’ll have won the war (Bumiller, 2010, p. A1).

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Bio

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