Making a Difference
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Preface

Unlike a scholarly work that presents several views on a given topic, this book offers a particular perspective on the relationship of public administration and society. Much of my writing has had normative grounding, but this project goes further. I am not sure I would call it political polemic, but—whatever the label—it is a departure from my other projects. It seems to me important to explain why I have chosen to write in a more directly normative style.

Like many of us, I often watch current public affairs with concern, and sometimes a feeling that things are going seriously wrong. Also like many of us, I rarely do much about it—beyond, in my case, writing an occasional letter, joining groups that reflect my interests, and trying to give my students a broad perspective on American history and culture. I was a young adult during the era of the Vietnam War. I knew something was rotten in the politics and policies of the nation, that something deeply brutal, wrong, and irrational was happening; but, unlike some of the people I knew, I did not take part in protests or take other overt action in opposition to the war.

Events of the past several years, though, have convinced me that silence and passivity are not acceptable. I write not only in reaction to recent events, but also because the themes of my scholarly work over two decades tell me I can no longer maintain distance from what is happening in society. There are times when civic responsibility means intervening in more direct ways.

If ever there were an appropriate time for passionate commitment in the service of change, this would appear to be it. From my perspective, the current situation in the United States includes: the national government run by people intent on making war; the physical environment under sustained attack; politically created increases in social inequality
and injustice; a citizenry ignorant of civil liberties and ready to exchange them for false protection from remote threats; a militaristic society saturated with violence; the nation headed toward fiscal ruin because of incompetent, politicized financial policies; and a field of public administration preoccupied with the manufactured distractions of economic performance and security.

The voices of upward redistribution of wealth and power say that citizens should focus their attention on things like apolitical efficiency, gay marriage, fetal cell research, and, of course, the latest sports and entertainment news. They say that the people should live in illogical fear of remote diseases and swarthy men lurking in dark corners. All this, they say, will happily keep us from interfering with the serious business of running a warfare state.

Conditions like these have appeared before in American history and will appear again. This description could have been written during the Vietnam era, and many of us who lived through those times thought the lessons would never be forgotten; now, our naïveté seems reminiscent of the belief that World War I was the “war to end all wars.” Of course, there are lessons aplenty in history on any number of public issues. For example, please enjoy the language and the message of this quotation before I reveal its source:

A little patience, and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore their government to its true principles. It is true that in the mean time we are suffering deeply in spirit, and incurring the horrors of a war & long oppressions of enormous public debt. . . . If the game runs sometimes against us at home we must have patience till luck turns, & then we shall have an opportunity of winning back the principles we have lost, for this is a game where principles are the stake.

This sounds as if it could have been written today, but instead it is in a letter about policies of the Adams administration during the 1790s. The letter was written to John Taylor on June 4, 1798 by Thomas Jefferson (in Peterson, 1984, p. 1050).

People who create and benefit from the societal conditions described above are not uncertain about who they are, what the world means, and how to get what they want. They are instead busily changing the world in their violent, destructive, greedy manner as quickly as they can. The typical scholarly stance of distancing ourselves from normative commit-
ment serves us well in many settings, but there are times when standing back to watch this level of destruction and irrationality can seem to be itself irrational.

In the book *Feminism as Radical Humanism* (1994), Pauline Johnson asks us to be conscious of universalist assumptions underlying humanist thought. However, she also cautions against abandoning historically significant ideals of autonomy and self-determination. I agree. In a time like this, ignoring ideals that allow us the liberty to discuss them seems equivalent to disarming oneself in the face of a deadly band of thieves.

For years, one of the books I used as an assigned text in my administrative ethics course was Thomas McCollough’s *The Moral Imagination and Public Life: Raising the Ethical Question* (1991). It is out of print and outdated, so I no longer use it; plus, its strong communitarian message and critique of individualism was too much for some students. Nevertheless, I thought that in this society students should have some exposure to the idea that we all share responsibility for what happens around us. McCollough’s ethical question “What is my personal relation to what I know?”—stays with me. The question is intended to push readers into wondering whether they are doing enough to change conditions that seem objectionable. In short: If I know about it, should I do something about it?

Things may be different by the time these words are published, but whatever is happening in the immediate present, I think we need to pay attention to what we know about history, society, and public affairs and administration, and to how it is passed along from generation to generation. Today, central issues of governance at the local, state, and national levels are poorly addressed or ignored, while “reforms” and the appearance of change are often little more than old wine in new bottles—distractions functioning to contain change. Meanwhile, there are hundreds, thousands, millions of lives that have been in various ways interrupted, distorted, made painful, or terminated by the actions of a government that has used my tax dollars to do what they have done. How can I not imagine the effects of my money and silence on these lives and the lost opportunities for these resources to do good things that need doing (things like improvements in education, infrastructure and civic renewal, and environmental protection)?

People who feel a need to respond to a question like McCollough’s do so with whatever skills they have. I write and teach, so this book is my response. The purpose of the book is to explore the possibilities for
people in public administration to influence the surrounding society and, through their actions and ideas, help to build a future that seems to them better than the present. In Chapter 1, I introduce pairs of regressive and progressive values evident in society, using examples of the effects of commercial militarism, social inequality, and environmental destruction. Chapter 2 discusses these value pairs in some detail. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the possibilities for progressive social change from the perspectives of the public service practitioner and the academician. The narrative in Chapter 5 draws the discussion together, offering concluding thoughts on progressive social change and public administration.

At its heart, this book is about lives and opportunities lost, parts of the physical environment ruined; but, at the same time, it is about hopes for a better future. I want to acknowledge that my inspiration to write came from those people and parts of the Earth that have been damaged or lost through cruelty, greed, and stupidity. It may not be possible to fully reverse or recover from what has been done, but it cannot hurt to try.

My thanks and gratitude go to the people who read the book and offered helpful comments and testimonials: Cheryl Simrell King, Gary Marshall, O. C. McSwite (Cynthia McSwain and Orion White), Patricia Patterson, and Frank Scott. Thanks also to M.E. Sharpe and Harry Briggs, who have given me wonderful opportunities to reach students and academicians in public administration.
Making a Difference
The Case for Progressive Values

As I see it, the Marxists were right about at least one thing: the central political questions are those about the relations between rich and poor.

—Richard Rorty
Philosophy and Social Hope
(1999, p. 232)

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.

—Karl Marx, 1845
Thesis XI
(In Tucker, 1972, p. 145)

Public administration is an applied professional field of study and practice; hence, much of the content of academic coursework in the field is about technical matters. Even so, it is a common experience for those who teach public administration to encounter students—both experienced professionals and people yet to begin their careers—who care deeply about the people and places they serve and have a broad sense of public service in society. These are people who want to “make a difference,” and they may be aware of tension between their desire for constructive change and political and economic conditions that make change difficult.

That tension can be thought of as a contradiction between views of what society might be and what it is today. Since the late 1800s, American government and public administration have been through successive waves of “reform,” which have generated normative concepts of budgeting, employee motivation, goal setting, quality control, organizational
structure, economic efficiency, citizen involvement, bureaucratic malfunction, bureaucratic legitimacy, administrative discretion, and more. Despite all this activity, dissatisfaction with government remains, as does the perceived tension between desire for change and conditions in society that resist change.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, societal conditions in the United States have moved in directions that worry many people interested in public affairs. Warfare, terror, and militarism have become dominating preoccupations; exposure to violence in the media and in the culture generally is far greater than it was a few decades ago; governmental responses to problems in the physical environment are either inadequate or harmful; many citizens accept losses in civil liberties; and economic inequality has grown to levels not experienced since early in the twentieth century. Of course, serious problems are not unique to our era; at various times in American history there have been challenges at least as disturbing as the present ones. Nevertheless, for some people the severity of current circumstances suggests a need to take action.

**Making a Difference**

Since public administration is thought to be an instrumental field tasked with implementing policy, not making it, one might assume that the appropriate role of practitioners and academicians is to deal with the consequences of societal conditions, not to change them. Yet, consider: Many public service employees exercise considerable judgment in their daily work and many frequently work with the public and participate in policy processes. Moreover, they provide information and also their own interpretations of the public interest to citizens, and to elected officials and political appointees who shape public sector actions. Furthermore, public administration scholars have taught many of these public professionals, as well as future academicians who will pass along to succeeding generations of practitioners and scholars their ideas about purposes and values. Thus, the field of public administration holds considerable potential to have a long-term effect on social change, and the classrooms and published work of scholars can be socially significant rather than trivial.

It is this context of serious societal problems and the desire of practitioners and academicians to make a difference that prompted me to think in a systematic way about the values evident in society and what people
in public administration might do to counter current trends. Much of the writing on government is about controlling bureaucracies and the people who work in them. Maximizing efficiency, monitoring performance, and endlessly “reforming” what is portrayed as a permanently dysfunctional public sector occupies the attention of both academicians and practitioners. This should surprise no one, because organizing and operating thousands of public sector agencies and programs in an urban-industrial society is incredibly complex and, especially in the United States, dislike of government is something of a national pastime.

This book is not an argument against “bureaucrat bashing” or for public recognition of the fine work done every day by people in public service, though these are important arguments that have been made before in the literature of American public administration. Neither is the book primarily a work of political theory about concepts such as democracy, governance, and citizenship, though they are an important part of this discussion and can give us descriptive insight into current trends. Arguments in defense of government or theories reconceptualizing the political system, along with writing about controlling or reforming bureaucracies and bureaucrats, can be thought of as “outside” perspectives, in which the work of delivering public services is an object of study. Instead, here we adopt an “inside” perspective from the subjective positions of individual public service practitioners and academicians as they think about their roles in society. This perspective includes description of the political/economic environment, which is essential for understanding the possibilities for action, but it is focused on the opportunities open to people in public administration to play a part in progressive social change.

There are a number of books that discuss social change and public administration. James Stever (1990) notes that debate about the role of public administrators in social change can be traced back at least to the Progressive Era. Like most academic writing, mine borrows from and builds on the work of other authors. For example, Cheryl Simrell King and Lisa Zanetti (2005) tell the stories of several practitioners who exemplify “transformational public service” and they use a critical theory framework. The stories found in King and Zanetti illustrate a passion for change also found at the center of the normative discussion in this book. Many practitioners and academicians are already doing the things discussed here, so the book’s narrative does not invent something new, but contributes to current practices with a focus on “regressive” and “progressive” values.
This work can be viewed as an extension of *Critical Social Theory in Public Administration* (Box, 2005), which outlines an approach to administrative action based on critical social theory. It borrows from *Critical Social Theory* a process of working from recognition of contradiction between desires and current conditions toward self-determination, but it has a different theme. It is a reflective response to observations about American society and government during the first decade of the twenty-first century and it advocates change in the direction of progressive values.

Often, those who propose normative concepts in public administration think of them as universally applicable across the public sector. No such claim is made for the ideas described here; instead, it is assumed they will be useful for a limited number of people in the field—people who believe that the current political and economic system contradicts values important to them, want to be part of a process of change, and have opportunities to take action.

Generalizing about public administration is difficult. In the United States in 2002 there were 87,576 units of government (U.S. Census, 2004b). In 2002 (U.S. Census, 2004a), the national government employed 2.69 million civilian employees (12.8 percent of all public employees), state governments employed 5.07 million people (24.1 percent of the total), and local governments, including school districts, employed 13.28 million people (63.1 percent). Taken together, that is more than 21 million people working in the public sector, and the number of occupations included in this number is impressive. Imagine it: social workers, federal housing program managers, police officers, elementary and high school teachers, wildlife biologists, health inspectors, university professors, and so on—hundreds of occupations, each with its own history, body of knowledge about practices, and expectations for how practitioners perform their roles and relate to citizens and elected leaders.

The scholarly study of public administration is also complex, including, as it does, people from many disciplinary backgrounds (political science, economics, public administration, sociology, criminal justice, and so on), all of whom work in a variety of institutional settings (departments and schools of government, political science, public administration, public affairs, and others). Hence, neither the practice nor the scholarly study of public administration lends itself easily to normative concepts that apply to everyone.

In addition, there are two more reasons to avoid claiming generalized
applicability for the ideas described here. One is that the central concept—change using “progressive” values as a guide—is not of interest to many people. This concept is based on a critical description of society that challenges the status quo, and it finds many things in need of improvement, advocating a particular sort of values as a guide to change. Challenging the status quo is uncomfortable for many people and the values discussed here will not be agreeable to everyone.

The second additional reason to avoid claiming generalizability is that only some public employees occupy positions in which they have opportunities to influence public policy, whether in routine interaction with the public, through interpretation of legislative enactments, or by assisting decision makers. Moreover, the focus of this discussion will be on the agencies and public professionals that carry out (and often shape) the will of those who decide on public policy.

This is not to deny that nonprofit organizations, interest groups, neighborhood associations, and other organizations, communities of interest, and people who influence the public policy process are all important to practitioners and scholars in public administration. There has been much written about the fragmentation and decentering of supposedly “traditional” structures and processes in the public sector, so that attention in the study of “governance” is shifting from the ways that elected legislators, citizens, and public administrators create and implement policy, to the operations of distributed networks of decision-making nodes that blur sectoral boundaries.

Indeed, it is certainly reasonable to question the extent to which on-the-ground public policy making and administration has shifted from government-centered to multi-nodal structures, or whether elements of fragmentation and decentralization have always been present. At the local level, public decision making and administration has always been a collaborative enterprise involving the broader community. Sometimes private, benefit-seeking interests exert a level of influence on public policy that many people think inappropriate—for example, machine politicians or landowners and developers. There are trends in the governance environment that warrant updating existing models, but this does not necessarily justify claims about wholesale change in the public sector. To evaluate this presumed shift at the state and national levels, one would need to first thoroughly describe the pre-existing situation before generalizing about it by creating a caricature of the past against which to compare the present.
Theorizing and commentary about public bodies seems to go through waves or cycles depending on events. Until recently, the common wisdom seemed to be that nation-states were on their way toward obsolescence; but with this era of international interventions, intense trade competition, and increasing difficulties with immigration, the idea of a fading nation-state needs significant revision. At the national and sub-national levels in the United States, a network environment in which many public service practitioners work with a variety of interest-based groups, individuals, and nonprofit and private organizations, is hardly new. For example, the idea that a city could be largely a contract-management body with services provided by other organizations, public and private, is at least as old as the “Lakewood Plan” in the Los Angeles area, dating back to 1954. As another example, the citizen involvement and neighborhood movements over the past four decades show shared responsibility for governance and boundary-spanning roles for public employees. There is no question things are changing and the governance environment is increasingly complex, but the current situation may be better described as developing from the past rather than as a clear break (McGuire, 2006, pp. 34–35). B. Guy Peters and John Pierre (1998, p. 240) note that the “new” thinking about governance may be a case of academia catching up with practice. Also, it may not have as much impact in the United States as in Europe, because government is somewhat delegitimated in the United States by negative public opinion about the public sector—plus, local government already uses intersectoral cooperation in daily operations (pp. 239–240).

On the other hand, while scholars speculate about the decentering of government and the decline of the representative, “overhead” model of democracy (in which citizens elect leaders to represent them and the elected leaders supervise public employees), public employees, elected officials, and citizens deal daily with the reality of constitutions, charters, laws, and court decisions based exactly on representation and institutional policy making. A department head or city manager who announces during the Tuesday night council meeting that she or he has decided to rely upon a network of people in the community for direction instead of the elected council members would want to have other employment arranged in advance.

Systems and structures such as representative democracy that seem malleable from an outside viewpoint suddenly become solid and demanding when considered from an inside perspective, loaded with legal
constraints, duties and responsibilities, and daily requirements for performance. To speak of social change, of “making a difference,” from this perspective carries meanings not readily apparent at the macro level of political theory. The focus shifts to the work of career public sector employees within existing systems and structures—this may include working to change those systems and structures, but the point of beginning is the perceived, experienced reality of today. The trend toward fragmentation of decision making across sectors, to the extent it exists, may contribute to constructive change if it increases democratic access, or may hinder it if decision making is parceled out to people who have little or no (public) responsibility to act fairly, equitably, and transparently.

One way or another, the responsibility for creating and implementing public programs using public funds falls ultimately to elected officials, political appointees, and the career public service. With that responsibility as a point of beginning, “governance,” while including the full range of boundary-spanning, intersectoral phenomena, can be used to mean “public governance,” creation and implementation of laws, systems, and programs that are funded by taxation and other sources of public revenue and apply collectively to everyone in a given geographic area. Therefore, it is the role of career public service practitioners in public governance that we want to examine here.

My intent is to link a passion for change to an analysis of “regressive” values evident in current conditions, a description of alternative, “progressive” values inherent in American history and culture, and discussion of action alternatives available to public-service practitioners and academicians who want to effect change. To write of “passion” may seem inappropriate in a technical-professional field such as public administration, but an emotional desire to make a difference precedes rational thought about action alternatives. Inspiration and passion are the grounds for a process of change; they provide the motivation for critical thought that examines what is, and imagines what could be.

We can be inspired to work for change in public life by events (such as war, depression, natural catastrophe, or a social movement), conditions (such as poverty, environmental degradation, or violence), and people (for example, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, or John F. Kennedy—for me, one such person is former Oregon Governor Tom McCall). Translating inspiration and a resulting passion for change into action is one thing for a citizen activist or a politician and quite another for a career public professional. For people working inside “the system,”
the potential for making a difference can be substantial, but doing so within the boundaries of a professional role requires skill, persistence, and often a willingness to take risks.

Inspiration and passion for change do not require foundational grounding in timeless principles. Theorists who think that social structures make efforts at change futile and those who think that postmodernism makes grand narratives about human action impossible may be right, in some abstract way that is divorced from daily human experience. However, we can be grateful that any number of people did not hear that it would be pointless to clean up sanitary conditions and corruption, help the poor, and so on; Jane Addams of the settlement house movement is a fine example. Meanwhile, we can “keep on spinning edifying first-order narratives” (Rorty, 1991, p. 212) about making things better, from within our own history and cultural values. With this goal in mind, the sections below describe the idea of regressive and progressive values and discuss a conceptual framework that supports progressive values in public administration.

This discussion, and the book, are oriented toward public administration in the United States. This is not only for the obvious advantage of writing about what I know, but because many of the conditions that prompted the work are especially evident in the United States and because the normative parts of the work are grounded in a particular cultural-historical experience. Some of the specifics of this analysis may be useful for people in other nations, and the broader matter of the role of public administration in social change should be relevant across national boundaries.

**Regressive and Progressive Values**

The conditions in society noted above as worrisome are warfare, terror and militarism, exposure to violence in the media and in the culture generally, inadequate or harmful governmental responses to problems in the physical environment, acceptance of loss of civil liberties, and economic inequality. The reader may think of things to add to this list, but the point is that current problems seem especially acute and disturbing, affecting millions of people and headed in directions that suggest they could get worse before they get better. It will be helpful to examine the societal context and its relationship with public administration, then think of this in terms of two sets of values, regressive and progressive. The analysis below of the political-economic system and conditions in
society is grounded in a critical social theory that begins with concepts from Herbert Marcuse’s work several decades ago (Box, 2005), “updating” them to fit the contemporary setting.

Current conditions emerge in a particular societal context and reflect a particular set of values. American society can be characterized as liberal-democratic-capitalist. “Liberal” is a word that was given a different meaning during the twentieth century than it had earlier, but in this context it carries the eighteenth-century meaning, favoring individual freedom and the legal and institutional arrangements that support it. “Democratic” is a fuzzy word that means different things in different contexts, but here it is used to mean an expectation that ordinary citizens can influence the course of societal events. In contemporary developed democratic societies there is such an expectation, but the extent to which expectations and perceptions match the actual workings of the political-economic system is open to question.

The capitalist economic systems of contemporary developed nations offer varying degrees of market freedom and all are “mixed” economies in which governments regulate private economic behaviors. Until the later part of the nineteenth century in the United States, the primary threat to individual freedom was thought to be government, and what we now call “classical liberalism” (to differentiate it from the twentieth-century version of liberalism, the big-government welfare state) was about protecting the individual from the collectivity (government). From the late 1800s on, though, the nature of the threat to the individual shifted, as large-scale corporate enterprises and interest groups began to exercise control over government.

Societal history can be told, in part, as a story about the relationship between the powerful and everyone else. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1986) portray this as a tension between personal rights and property rights, manifest in a series of “accommodations” in which the powerful allow the mass public certain levels of freedom and participatory access to decision making to promote social stability and economic growth. In large-scale urban corporate society, to say “the powerful” often means people in corporate entities that seem to move forward largely unimpeded by interests in the broader society; indeed, ownership of the media provides a means to shape the interests of the public in order to smooth the implementation of corporate goals. And, of course, the extent to which corporate interests influence the electoral and legislative processes is well known. Success in limiting the public’s knowledge of ways that
current political and economic systems might be changed varies over time. Sometimes, greater public awareness of societal and environmental conditions leads to resistance and protest, so that meliorative steps are taken. In public administration, examples of resistance to the status quo include whistleblowers calling attention to political interference with administrative processes, neighborhood residents organizing to self-govern, and academicians writing about public administration’s role in social change.

Throughout American history there have been eras when the desires of a few for power and profit have exercised heightened dominance over societal conditions, and other times when the excesses of these eras have been countered by mobilization of the public, through government. Historian Arthur Schlesinger suggests this is a “continuing shift in national involvement, between public purpose and private interest” (1986, p. 27). It is not easy to change the balance between the power of the few and the long-term interests of the many (one might call the latter “the public interest,” though that is a complex and awkward concept [Box, 2007c]), but there are examples of successes, such as the Progressive Era, the women’s suffrage movement, the New Deal, the civil rights movement, the Great Society, and the environmental movement.

These periods of “public purpose” are often followed by periods of retrenchment, but it might be argued that the contemporary era is one in which retrenchment has become normalcy. Beginning in the 1980s, certain events occurred in the political and economic spheres. These events included the demonization of government, increases in spending on the military and cuts in domestic programs, tax policies that shift wealth upward, the decreased regulation of business, a reversal of environmental gains, a willingness to impose beliefs of social conservatives on others through government, governmental intrusion on privacy, and the invasion of other nations. All these seem to have intensified the contradiction between a vision of America as exemplar of democracy, liberty, peace, and opportunity, and America as a society of force, violence, injustice, and abuse of the natural world. It is not that these characteristics are new or different in kind from what has gone before; even a passing knowledge of history refutes that notion. It is that contemporary technology, superpower status, and an apparent loss of societal knowledge of historical and future alternatives have put the nation in a situation from which recovery seems difficult or unlikely, a situation Herbert Marcuse (1964) called “one-dimensional.”
The political-economic setting bounds, constrains, and shapes the structures and practices of public administration, and the language and practices of the field have shifted in response to changes in the societal context. As economic rationality penetrates more thoroughly into the public sector, economistic language becomes the language of practice and study; examples include words and ideas such as managerialism, performance over purpose, the public as consumers instead of citizens, and running government like a business. Increasingly, governance appears to consist of decentralized actions benefiting multiple interests, instead of collective decision making. The daily work of public practitioners seems less visible in academic public administration amid the study of “policy,” often oriented toward actors outside the career public service. The focus of scholarly writing seems to be shifting from the purposes of public administration in a democratic society to legislative policy making and to monitoring and measuring efficient governmental performance. (I have not counted articles in multiple journals published over several years to test this thought, but it bears consideration. There is useful scholarly writing addressing related shifts in knowledge use in public administration, for example, Raadschelders, 2005; Spicer, 2007; Terry, 1998.) To the extent that attention in the field is focused on outside perspectives—such as creation of policy, controlling and monitoring bureaucrats, and maximizing efficiency—inside perspectives—such as effective service delivery, citizen involvement in policy making and program implementation, reflection on the role of the public service practitioner in a democratic society, and imagination and inspiration in service of social change—will be slighted.

It is not necessary here to discuss the practical and scholarly history of the politics-administration relationship. It is sufficient to note that academic public administration has acknowledged over several decades that no clear separation exists between these two spheres and that interactions between career public employees and citizens and elected officials are complex, nuanced, and variable over time and place. Practitioners who work closely with elected officials and citizens have always known there is no easy way to separate the policymaking sphere from the administrative sphere, though the roles and behaviors of people in each are quite different. Because public service practitioners often influence citizen perceptions of government and society, and because public administration academicians influence the thinking of practitioners and others, the extent to which the political-
economic setting affects ideas, practice, and published work in public administration is important.

Public administration is in harmony with its political-economic surroundings when it furthers the goals of people who benefit from minimal public-sector interference in the market. That relationship is hindered when public administration practice or scholarship challenges the status quo by supporting social justice, environmental protection, a quality living environment, or other ends that might conflict with the interests of the powerful. This is particularly true in the American setting, which by virtue of cultural history includes an expectation of a relatively weak and passive public sector in relation to the private, market sector. Thus, when public administration practitioners or academicians advocate social change they often incur risks of disapproval from citizens, elected leaders, prominent members of the community, academic administrators or tenure/promotion review committees, and so on.

This leads back to the question of why people in public administration would want to act in favor of progressive social change, and it requires a definition and description of the terms “regressive” and “progressive.” Before discussing these terms in detail, I want to offer three examples that illustrate how regressive values become evident in society. The first example is drawn from the context of warfare and invasion, the second from issues of health care and treatment of minorities, and the third from environmental management. One of the two vignettes in the second example is a fictional composite of similar circumstances and the remainder are taken from actual events. Each is about an immediate, small-scale result of governmental action or inaction, rather than large-scale abstractions such as “international affairs,” “social inequality,” or “the environment.”

The first example will be familiar to people paying attention to current events. Though the specifics may be quite different by the time this is published and in succeeding years, the invasion and occupation of Iraq will mark the American mind for some time, as did the war in Vietnam. This is not the place to thoroughly review events associated with the Iraq war, so a brief summary will suffice. The United States invaded a weak sovereign nation run by a dictator—a nation that posed almost no realistic threat to its neighbors or to the United States because it had been broken by wars and was closely supervised by the international community. A variety of more-or-less fictive justifications were invented for public consumption (weapons of mass destruction, spreading democracy through
the region, fighting “terrorism,” and so on), but the primary practical, believable reason seems to have been to influence events in the middle of an oil-producing region. There may also have been other “real” reasons of differing importance, such as benefiting military-industrial corporations, intimidating other nations in the region, increasing military preparedness, distracting Americans from a conservative agenda, and so on.

As of this writing, in late 2007, outcomes have included: chaos in Iraq, with intensely unsafe conditions for everyone; confirmation of the warnings of knowledgeable people prior to the invasion that the society lacked capacity to reform and govern itself; four million Iraqis forced out of their homes, with two million of them living as refugees in surrounding nations; hundreds of thousands of Iraqis killed and maimed; almost four thousand American soldiers dead and many more permanently injured; America’s role in the international community seriously damaged, with the nation now widely regarded as lacking moral authority and competence in foreign affairs; a revitalized and expanded global extremist network.

Any number of cases describing the impact of these events on individual lives could be chosen, such as that of an orphaned Iraqi child, a family driven out of the home in which they had lived for generations, women too terrified to go out of their homes, and so on. For this example, though, I wish to use some fleeting images from a television news report. It was about a young woman in the U.S. military whose legs were blown off at the knees in an incident in Iraq. She has small children and she is being fitted for prosthetic legs. This is hardly the worst example of personal injury we could have chosen; unlike some others, this person has the use of her hands, she has not been blinded, she has not suffered a brain injury that makes it difficult to think and communicate, and so on. However, the television image stays with me. The woman is sitting on an examination table with her bare legs at the edge; nothing—no knees, no calves, no feet—hangs down. There are large scars, with the regular woven pattern of stitches, just above the stumps at her knees. She appears to be a strong, vital person who wants to get on with her life, but that life will forever be much different from what it would otherwise have been.

It may not be essential to use an example like this in a discussion of values operative in society, but often people do not clearly understand the impacts of governmental action unless they are confronted with concrete, specific reality. We might think of the characteristics of a society
in which government would take such an action as the invasion of Iraq in any number of ways, but I wish to emphasize these three concepts: aggressiveness rather than cooperation, belief rather than knowledge, and economics as an end rather than as a means. In relation to aggressiveness and cooperation, there had been for some time cooperative processes in place to deal with Iraq and they had successfully contained (the already minimal) Iraqi threat. Aggressiveness was a choice, not a necessity.

The decision to invade was made on the basis of belief, not knowledge. Even people like me, with only a moderate, rather commonplace level of knowledge of foreign affairs knew before the invasion that it was: irrational in relation to the characteristics of the country (knowledge of that reality was readily available in ordinary press and electronic media outlets); startling, even bizarre to a person who has processed the lessons of Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s; an unfortunate international precedent to invade as one wishes in the absence of immediate and significant threat; and, except for the apparent reasons given above, completely unnecessary. Lots of fun, maybe, for people who enjoy watching invasion coverage from “embedded” reporters, great training for the military, and a wonderful profit-booster for companies involved with politically influenced, inflated, no-bid contracts for work in Iraq. However, this is a miserable set of benefits in exchange for the effects on the one person in our example, let alone the millions of others whose lives have been interrupted, forever changed in negative ways, ruined, or terminated.

The woman in our example was, granted, a volunteer who knew the risks. Nevertheless, this result was not an accident and it was caused by government action, meaning action taken in the name of every American, funded with money taken from our paychecks and carried out by professional career government employees in several departments and agencies. In the meantime, it is useful for us to envision the cost to this woman, in terms of the daily reality of her experience for the next fifty or sixty years. That is a lot of days, a lot of coping with the difference between a normal body and what her body has become. All this because government officials used belief, in the form of ideological (and in some cases religious) commitment, to make decisions, rather than knowledge of on-the-ground reality.

If we accept for argument that the “real” reasons for the invasion and occupation were economic and political, then the third concept I wish to emphasize in this example is the problem of economics as end rather than as means. To the extent that economic gain for individuals rather
than evaluation of a broader public good is the primary motivation for public action, the potential for distorted, unfair, and seriously damaging results increases significantly. Economic efficiency and economic well-being are standard components of public deliberation and action, but there are important purposes at play in the public sphere (including democracy, transparency, fairness, respect for others, and equity) and they carry expectations far beyond economic gain.

The second example of how regressive values become evident in society is about socio-economic inequality, and it consists of two vignettes. In the first vignette, a woman, a single mother in her twenties, recently took a “pink-collar” job in a mall outlet of a national retailing company. She will be eligible for medical insurance through her employer in another month, but in the meantime she has been very thirsty and has been urinating a great deal. These are symptoms of diabetes, which occurs in her family. She is aware this could be serious, but she does not want the insurance company to know about it and declare it a “pre-existing condition,” which they would not cover when her insurance comes into effect. Thus, she risks serious health consequences by staying away from her doctor. This would not happen if the United States had universal health coverage, like many other developed nations—but it does not.

The second vignette takes us into an inner-city school, to the classroom desk of a ten-year-old black child. He is healthy, good-looking, and alert, but his reading, writing, and math skills match only those of white children in suburban schools who are several years younger. The boy’s chances of graduating from high school are poor and his lifetime job and earning prospects are not good; in fact, he may be destined to spend a significant portion of his life in prison. Supposedly, everyone in the United States is entitled to an “equal” education regardless of race. The reality, though, is that this boy’s school receives fewer resources per pupil than nearby suburban schools, and the better teachers avoid this school in favor of the suburbs. He lives in an area with few retail stores, and where the only food markets sell mostly expensive and unhealthy processed foods. There are almost no places to work locally, and there is frequent street violence. The race-related local culture puts down education and knowledge as “white,” thus alien and undesirable; male strength and violence are valued, and gangs and crime are commonplace. These conditions are not inevitable and they are in part the result of decades of failed governmental policies, followed by neglect. Many, if not most, of them could be reversed with prudent investments in community building.
The money being used in the Iraq war could make a significant impact on these conditions, reversing decades of neglect and dependency and creating instead economically vibrant communities in which people have a sense of hope and opportunity.

These two stories are intended to illustrate increasing socio-economic inequality. Since World War II, Americans have come to expect rising incomes and an always-improving standard of living. The anti-poverty initiatives of the 1960s–70s did much to alleviate conditions—for example, related to poverty in Appalachia—but the longer-term effects of interventions into urban areas were mixed. Beginning in the 1980s, the national government abandoned the idea of a systematic approach to problems of inequality. Efforts to reverse urban decline are few and weak, and national taxation policy has often favored corporations and the wealthy. In the past two or three decades, the upper-middle and wealthy classes have done quite well; suburbs in many cities are studded with “starter castles,” single-family homes of four, five, six thousand square feet and larger. In an earlier generation, the parents of the owners of these homes would have thought that houses only half the size of these were appropriate for people of means. Aside from the size of homes, many people have second houses in vacation spots, often large and substantial houses that would easily provide shelter for two or three families in urban areas if they were located there. All of this is accompanied by lifestyles and rates of consumption unknown in earlier times.

These trends are symptomatic of increasing inequality, not just the tabloid-headline inequality focused on race and pockets of poverty, but a large-scale transition to a bi-modal society, one that economist Paul Krugman (2002, 2007) likens to the Gilded Age of the robber barons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and one in which inequality is greater than in almost all other developed nations. During the early years of the Republic, Americans mistrusted displays of great wealth, which was thought to be characteristic of hated European royalty and their courtiers. There have been periods, for example the 1930s and 1960s, when inequality was considered a cause of economic malfunction and social unrest. Today, though, resistance to inequality is relatively muted and there appears to be little political will to stop or reverse the trend.

The characteristic of a society in which the public sector would encourage such inequality and would deal with the impacts on individual lives in fragmentary, ineffectual ways may be called “great” inequality as
contrasted with “limited” inequality (such as is found in social-democratic nations). It comes to ground in the lives of people such as those in our two vignettes. What rationale finds it acceptable that the woman with the pink-collar job may become seriously ill because the richest nation in the world lacks the sort of health care found in other such nations? What rationale finds it acceptable that the boy in the inner-city school is relegated to a poor, violent, primitive existence only a few miles from children living in starter castles? And all of this occurring at the same time hundreds of billions in tax revenues are spent on the war in Iraq.

The third example of regressive values at work in society relates to the natural environment. This particular example is about destruction of old-growth forest in Southern Oregon. To support the building of suburbs following World War II, the rate of harvest of commercial-grade trees in the Pacific Northwest increased. The rate of cutting accelerated in the following decades, so that by the 1980s the practice of clear-cutting, that is, taking all trees off a given plot of land, had removed all but a few spots of old-growth forest from the mountains of Western Washington and Oregon, where the growing conditions produce dense forests of Douglas Fir and other valuable species.

Old-growth forests are forests in which a number of species of trees and other plants grow together in a natural ecosystem. The person walking through the forest sees a high layer of vegetation up to two hundred fifty feet above ground level, on the upper parts of spectacular trees hundreds of years old. Other trees of several species may grow at lower levels, and on the forest floor is a rich mixture of mossy, decaying fallen trees, shrubs and smaller vegetation, and wildlife. It is a beautiful, peaceful place, a self-regulating world of natural balance.

Clear-cutting completely destroys this world. Many years later, it is replaced by planted commercial trees (“second-growth”) allowed to grow to a certain size, then clear-cut again. Such a single-species, “monoculture” tree plantation is not the balanced ecosystem of the old-growth forest, it is a farm that grows wood to build houses. It is not essential that wood be harvested in this way; there are ways to selectively cut trees from older forests without destroying the ecosystem, but of course they are expensive, not regarded as sufficiently profitable. Owners of private forest plots have exhausted their supply of trees (or wish to preserve it for a time when prices are especially high), so they cut from public lands, national forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agencies are tasked with providing for
multiple uses of forest lands, but in practice they serve the forest products industry by making available huge tracts of timber for clear-cutting at costs far below market value.

In the late 1980s, lawsuits brought by environmental groups forced the national government to use a public process for evaluating which forest areas, both old-growth and second-growth, should be cut to meet “quotas” set by legislation. Part of this process involved “timber sale advisory boards,” small groups of citizens brought in to the timber management process in regional administrative areas of the Forest Service and BLM. Their role was to study the hundreds of potential forest plots that might be cut in a particular region and choose which would be harvested to meet the annual quota. They were given data in the form of aerial photos, field trips, and detailed reports by wildlife biologists, geologists, foresters, and other professional specialists.

I served on one of these boards as a representative from a local state college. We were dealing with one of the largest, most productive resource regions managed by the BLM and we had professional support from a large competent staff. I reached two conclusions following this experience that are pertinent here. One is that it was difficult to find remaining commercial-grade trees in this huge expanse of public land; decades of clear-cutting had reduced the forests mostly to second-growth that was not quite large enough, with a few isolated pockets of old-growth trees.

Second, there was conflict between the traditional foresters who had been with the BLM for many years and who served as supervisors, and the younger, newer employees from other professional specializations, such as wildlife management. The traditionalists saw their job, largely, as making as much timber as possible available to industry. The newer employees took seriously the goal of protecting endangered species and the forest ecosystem and they often disagreed with the recommendations of the foresters. However, the disagreements were suppressed, made evident in facial expressions, guarded wording of reports, and private conversations with timber sale advisory board members.

The event that serves as an example is a field trip to visit plots of land our board was studying. One of the plots we viewed was a rare stand of old-growth forest. Board members were traveling in a BLM van on a winding, narrow gravel forest road. We rounded a corner and came down a hill to a little valley at a bend in the road. We stopped where the valley intersected the road to look up the valley at a parcel proposed for clear-cutting. It was heart-breakingly beautiful, with tall, massive old
growth trees, a green, mostly open floor, and rays of sunlight beaming down through the trees. The cliché about old-growth forest is that it looks inside like a cathedral, and that is how this looked. Later on, back in the BLM offices, the board voted to clear-cut this parcel. I had gone along with most of the approvals during my time on the board, but I told the group I could not vote for this one. If we voted to approve this cut there was, I believed, no reason to have a board, since anything could be cut. I have never forgotten that little valley, a tiny remnant of natural ecosystem among miles of scrub vegetation and second-growth timber.

The characteristic of a society in which the public sector would serve as facilitator of private economic gain despite clear, unnecessary, brutal damage to the natural world may be called “Earth viewed as a resource” versus “Earth thought of as home.” Any number of examples could be used to illustrate these contrasting views, especially now, when the physical environment is under sustained and unprecedented attack by those who would destroy it for private gain. This small, isolated image of the doomed valley of old-growth trees, with their companion species and wildlife, is for me emblematic of a fundamental question: what is the appropriate relationship between humans and the Earth? This question appears again and again in thousands of decisions large and small, in national and state capitals, and in cities and counties. It appears in debates about environmental policies affecting millions of acres of land, and it appears in small-scale issues of local planning for growth.

These examples, each in its small, focused way, draw attention to what we may call “regressive” values in society. Over time, people can become unaware of ways to organize institutions and governance that are different from the status quo, as knowledge of societal history evaporates and contemporary media reinforce the wishes of what C. Wright Mills (1956) identified as economic, political, and military elites. This phenomenon can be called “containment” (Marcuse, 1964), the process of screening the awareness of alternatives out of public knowledge. The existing degree to which those with power and wealth influence public affairs is often accepted without reflection as given—the way things are. As noted above, in the past few decades this “one-dimensionality” seems to be intensifying; however, in the daily work of public administration, inattention to characteristics of society and the effects of public actions can be interrupted by specific events such as the examples noted above.

It is good to be careful about generalizations, for internal differences exist within groups. Named groups such as “citizens,” “elected officials,”
“practitioners,” “corporations,” “people with wealth and power,” or “elites” are not internally monolithic, they are aggregates of individuals with differences in views and behaviors. To use one of these group identifiers is to describe current dominant views or behaviors of a group as a whole, and these are subject to change. To say, for example, that corporations resist movement toward progressive values is to summarize perceived corporate behavior, but it is important to recognize that not all corporations exhibit such behavior and it may change over time, on particular issues or values, or overall. In addition there are, of course, differences in interpretation of the characteristics of groups; one person’s greedy, conspiratorial elite is another person’s public-spirited guardian class, one person’s civic-minded citizens are another person’s selfish self-maximizers, and so on.

In the examples, regressive values in evidence include aggressiveness, irrational belief, economics as an end in itself, great social inequality (in this example, grounded in prejudice and intolerance), and Earth as a resource pool for business activities. These values may be contrasted with “progressive” values of cooperation, knowledge and openness to alternatives, economics as means rather than end, limited inequality, and Earth as a home to be protected. The reader may identify other values and I do not mean to suggest that these are the only ones of importance. These were chosen because: they are clearly in evidence over the recent history of the public sector, especially in the United States; they connect with issues that have long been of significance in the study and practice of public administration; and, they are relevant across most or all specialized areas in the field. Though the choice of values may seem somewhat random, arbitrary, or tailored to current conditions that may change, I believe they capture much of the meaning and motivation associated with important operational matters in public administration. The values are broad and far-reaching and they do not specify particular governmental structures, processes, or policies, though they can be linked to these things quite directly. (For example, on an operational level deciding whether to begin a citizen involvement program in a local government might involve most or all of the value pairs. This is also true on the conceptual level, such as in addressing the question of whether a particular administrative system or structure favors democratic access to the policy process.)

Regressive values emphasize economics and strong, masculine action, so they are linked to terms such as individual self-maximization, aggression, competition, conflict, and efficiency. These characteristics
are common throughout human history and they are often important to achievement of useful goals. In excess, though, they can produce effects on people and the environment that many find negative, damaging, and regrettable. When they are dominant, they seem to push humanity back toward earlier times in ways that many think would best be avoided.

Progressive values emphasize a humanist ethic linked to terms such as individual self-determination, mutual benefit, democracy, cooperation, tolerance, and public good. This use of the word “progressive” does not mean to suggest that events are moving without fail toward a utopian future or that progressive values are foundational and universally “good,” nor is it intended to evoke specific characteristics of the Progressive Era. It does imply that there are ways to move toward ends such as Herbert Marcuse’s “freedom, peace, and happiness” (1968, p. 254) and Thomas Jefferson’s “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” or historian Howard Zinn’s statement of ultimate values: “war, poverty, race hatred, prisons should be abolished; that mankind constitutes a single species; that affection and cooperation should replace violence and hostility” (1990, p. 20). Use of the term “humanist” does not mean to suggest an invariant human nature or a social good common to all societies, but instead reminds us of the importance of Enlightenment concepts such as individual freedom, self-determination, and action based on knowledge rather than belief.

And, two more distinctions or reservations. First, the contrast between regressive and progressive values is not meant to parallel the contrast between individualism and communitarianism. Regressive and progressive values can be found in circumstances we would think of as individualist or communitarian. An individualist can behave in cooperative ways based on knowledge, treating economics as a tool rather than an end, promoting limited inequality and care for the environment. Conversely, a communitarian may behave aggressively on the basis of belief, and so on (for an account of the dangers of the idea of community, see Phillips, 1993).

Second, the concept of regressive and progressive values is related to values of public service often discussed in the literature of public administration (see, for example, Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007), but there are differences of scale and focus. Public service values may be about humane and effective management techniques (intra-organizational values), responding appropriately to the political environment through accountability, transparency, and so on (extra-organizational values), or
working toward goods such as citizen involvement, democracy, or social justice (societal values).

The concept of regressive and progressive values belongs in the category of societal values, but it is different from commonly mentioned public service values in two ways. The first is that regressive and progressive values are general characteristics evident in society. Democracy, citizen involvement, and so on are ways to advance progressive values but they are different in scale, involving specific institutions, systems, and processes that may affect regressive and progressive values. Second, the sole purpose of the regressive-progressive values construct is to inspire and give structure and direction to a desire for constructive social change. It is grounded in a critical analysis of social conditions, and the intent, drawn from critical social theory, is to give people the opportunity and information they need to create change. When practitioners or academicians discuss public service values they may share this intent or have other purposes in mind, but the regressive and progressive values construct is focused on social change.

Table 1 displays regressive and progressive values in the form of five continuums. This format is meant to show the values as interrelated rather than as dichotomies. Specific values may be present or absent in any particular public policy setting (as shown in our examples above) and regressive or progressive characteristics may be stronger or weaker depending on the situation. These value pairs may also be thought of as contradictions, descriptions of conditions in society that contradict the preferences some people hold for societal values.

Practical choices about whether to emphasize regressive or progressive values are a matter of individual preference in specific situations. It is not appropriate for me to suggest that everyone should promote progressive values in all circumstances; that will not happen, but also progressive values are not always the best choice (for example, a police officer who is being shot at needs to be aggressive, not cooperative, though in calmer settings the same officer may be an advocate of community-oriented policing, which demonstrates progressive values). The long-term question is whether public service practitioners and academicians, through choices made in their daily work, can help move society closer toward progressive values. Progressive values have not been doing very well recently, so it is probably safe to assume that making them more evident in public affairs will be neither easy nor speedy. Nevertheless, each of the examples of regressive values given
above contains opportunities for constructive change, and the reader
can imagine possible alternative outcomes had progressive values been
more prominent. Public administration teachers can show their students,
who are or soon will be practitioners or academicians, alternatives to
the current reality that embody progressive values. Practitioners can
use progressive values to change operations, procedures, and decision
making in individual cases, and to assist in framing policy recommenda-
dations to decision makers.

The values in these five pairs are not necessarily unique or exclusive
and there probably are other pairs that would be equally appropriate to
this discussion. People interested in specific areas of practice within
public administration (such as social work, international diplomacy, and
parks administration) can find complimentary pairs that fit their area of
practice (for example, a regressive-progressive pair in planning practice
might be competition for growth versus sustainability).

A Conceptual Framework

The sections above discuss desire for constructive social change, current
societal conditions, and regressive and progressive values. The central
theme of this book is advancing progressive values through public ad-
ministration practice and scholarship, but the description of progressive
values and action in public administration needs some conceptual sup-
port. It is offered below in the areas of human behavior and immanent
critique in the American context.

Current conditions in society are the beginning point for this discus-
sion. In the preceding section, I sketched a portrait of American political
and economic systems in the early twenty-first century. In a successful
liberal-capitalist society, thanks to technology, people are occupied with
consuming an amazing array of goods and services, corporate media create a culture that supports the consumer economy, environmental damage accelerates, and knowledge of alternative ways of approaching issues of governance and public life fades. In the United States, militarism and a “warfare state” mentality support economic coercion of other nations (under cover stories such as protecting security and “promoting democracy”) and the contradiction deepens between a vision of a peaceful democracy and the present reality.

Later chapters of the book offer additional description of current societal conditions, and analysis through the lens of critical social theory is presented at length in *Critical Social Theory in Public Administration* (Box, 2005). Current conditions, though, are only a beginning point for a discussion of social change and regressive and progressive values. The idea that practitioners and academicians would act to move society away from regressive values and toward progressive values is entirely normative—it is voluntary, it is advocacy, it is distinctly not value-neutral.

Characterization of current conditions in society and imagining alternative futures are based on the reality of institutions, practices, and the physical environment as they are, but both the characterization and the choice of value direction are matters of personal interpretation and preference. This normative project invites us to think about some issues underlying characterization of society and normative choice, such as: the unit of analysis (is it the individual, organizations, societies?); why people do what they do (the perennial problem of human nature); and, the conceptual grounding for choosing particular values and potential futures.

In the material below, the reader will find a tension between modernist and postmodernist views of knowledge and meaning. I am interweaving a time-and-culture-bound, non-foundational perspective on knowledge and social change, drawn from the work of neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, with social critique and sense of imagination drawn from first-generation Frankfurt School critical theorist Herbert Marcuse. I agree with Rorty in thinking we should expect to draw norms and a sense of purpose from knowledge of our specific cultural history and circumstances, not from timeless principles or autonomous reason. I am also appreciative of Marcuse’s critique of liberal-capitalist society and his emancipatory wish for a better future. Like Rorty (1998a, p. 321), I think that “emancipation” means working toward specific solutions to today’s problems rather than
releasing a deep, suppressed, human truth, I find in Marcuse’s wish to imagine alternatives something much needed in the contemporary world. Both Rorty and Marcuse wish for a future with less cruelty and suffering than is found in the present; beyond that, they diverge and I must craft my own sense of a way forward within the context of American public administration.

Some readers may think this work would be done more appropriately without resorting to social philosophers such as Rorty and Marcuse, but they provide conceptual depth and connection to broad streams of thought that are directly applicable to normative theory in public administration. Other readers may think a wider range of theorists would make a better foundation. I discuss the work of a number of authors in this narrative, but Rorty and Marcuse offer, for me, unique and powerful ways to approach the problem of identifying and describing viable paths forward that are, as Rorty would put it, hopeful.

**Human Behavior**

The beginning point of this analysis is the same as the beginning point for Enlightenment thought—the individual in relation to society. Today, social theory may envision individual action, power, and institutions and practices as parts of a web or network of shared influence and outcomes. The individual is a product of upbringing in a particular society with its norms and expectations, so to think of individual agency or freedom to act, especially in complex contemporary urban society, seems anachronistic. In this view, there never was an autonomous individual free to act and create her/himself separately from the crowd and there certainly isn’t one now.

The significance of this view must be recognized; to the extent the humanist tradition assumes human reason that transcends historical, societal circumstances it should be questioned. Individuals are to a large extent socially constructed and each of us thinks and acts from the peculiar perspective of our personal background and the culture that surrounds us in neighborhood, city, state, and nation. (This becomes especially obvious when we travel to other countries and interact with people whose assumptions about matters such as the relationship of the individual to the broader society are quite different from ours.) Critical theorists have always recognized the social embeddedness of each person; for example, in 1947 Max Horkheimer wrote:
The absolutely isolated individual has always been an illusion. The most esteemed personal qualities, such as independence, will to freedom, sympathy, and the sense of justice, are social as well as individual virtues. The fully developed individual is the consummation of a fully developed society. (p. 135)

Nevertheless, each of us is born alone and dies alone, we have our own fears, aspirations, and life experiences. (Extreme conditions such as life-threatening illness or accident, confinement in a prison or concentration camp and so on, highlight the individual nature of our experience as an organic being.) Moreover, the American tradition of democracy, law, rights, and government is based on the individual. (I will avoid generalizing about other nations, though similar things might be said about many of them with some modification of emphasis and specifics.) It is the individual who feels pain, suffering, satisfaction, or happiness, the individual whose consciousness can be threatened with extinction, the individual who is acted upon by public or private institutions, the individual who imagines and creates change—yes, in concert with others and within a societal framework, but there is a point of beginning, a locus of desire and analysis, an experiencing being who chooses, however formed and bounded the choice is by the social context.

In a book about normative thought in public administration, it may seem odd to focus on the time-worn matter of human nature. I labeled this sub-section “human behavior” so as to avoid annoying those who think exploring human nature an outmoded, pointless exercise. But it really cannot be avoided; when we think about conditions in society, we think about conditions created by people acting in patterns that can be found in other places and in other times. Authors throughout human history have written about the dramas of greed, lust for power, and so on. One need not resort to fiction or television shows to see these dramas playing out today; one need only pay attention to the news. It seems odd, maybe even empirically sloppy, to discuss public affairs without identifying relevant regularities in human behavior and observing how they play out in practice. Ignoring such regularities would, it seems, lead to poor understanding of both current events and the likely future. To say there is misbehavior in government, that social inequality is growing, that people are destroying the natural environment at an increasing pace—these things and others beg the question: So why do we do it?

In addressing this question, though, we can avoid the issue of whether
there is a permanent human nature that is hard-wired and unchangeable. The complexities of genetics and the brain are beyond the scope of this narrative, but it seems the state of knowledge is as yet somewhat uncertain about to what extent human behaviors are the result of nature or nurture and to what extent they can be changed over time. Some of those behaviors are constructive and helpful to others, whether they are altruistic or based in self-interest (as Alexis de Tocqueville put it, “self-interest properly understood”). However, since this narrative is about countering regressive values with progressive values, we focus, logically, on behaviors that tend to benefit the few at the expense of the many. The task here is much narrower than sorting out whether behaviors are hard-wired or culturally induced. Instead, it is to identify behaviors that affect public affairs, to ameliorate the effects of those we think damaging, and to suggest that often behaviors which might enhance progressive values are “better” than those favoring regressive values.

For critical theory, human behavior has potential for improvement. In liberal-capitalist society people are largely unaware of the effects of consumerism and preoccupation with the entertainments and manufactured news generated by corporations and their house media outlets. Supposedly, if given a broader perspective beyond this illusion, people could find productive and satisfying ways of living that would allow the best in human behavior to emerge. The portion of this analysis relating to conditions in society seems plausible, but the assumption that people would somehow behave differently in a different society seems logically tenuous and not especially useful in the present. For our purposes it is more useful to focus on human behavior as it appears today, so that the question becomes not what people might be like in a distant utopia, but what they might aspire to in the future in this society.

Assessments of human behavior are hardly new. In Federalist Paper No. 51 (written in 1787 or 1788), James Madison, a primary architect of the Constitution, expresses in summary form the view of human nature that shaped the governmental institutions of the Republic. Madison and his colleagues thought people capable of self-sacrifice and regard for others, but nevertheless burdened in their mundane, daily affairs with ordinary impulses toward greed and acquisition of power. These impulses, they thought, could be offset by a complex and fragmented governmental structure intended to make unitary exercise of power more difficult. Madison’s (1961, p. 322) description of the underlying problem is classic:
Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place [position in government]. It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.

This is a clear description of the problem of human behavior in the public sphere. Given historical developments since Madison wrote, and most especially recent events, it seems obvious that he identified a central problematic of governance in a democratic republic: to design governmental structures that will constrain the anticipated excesses of human behavior. These excesses (ambition, lust for power, use of government for self-benefit) are on virtually constant display today, in ways that have widespread effects Madison could not have imagined, so it seems fair to conclude they are found in common across significant gulfs in time.

Richard Rorty has also written about human behavior. He has done so in strong terms that sound essentialist, though he refuses to draw fixed, permanent generalizations. Despite this limitation, he powerfully captures the problematic character of human behavior—here is a historical description:

To say that history is “the history of class struggle” is still true, if it is interpreted to mean that in every culture, under every form of government, and in every imaginable situation (e.g., England when Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, Indonesia after the Dutch went home, China after Mao’s death, Britain and America under Thatcher and Reagan) the people who have already got their hands on money and power will lie, cheat and steal in order to make sure that they and their descendants monopolize both for ever. (Rorty, 1999, p. 206)

Rorty argues that large-scale occurrences of, for example, democracy or fascism simply happen, that they cannot be predicted. People are swept along by events rather than shaping the sort of society in which they would like to live—in this sense, society creates the individual and
there is no recourse to timeless principles, just the will of those currently in power. This characterization of the relationship of the individual to society also includes an almost offhand summary view of how power is sorted out among elites: “Socialization, to repeat, goes all the way down, and who gets to do the socializing is often a matter of who manages to kill whom first” (Rorty, 1989, p. 185). To work toward a better future, Rorty thinks concrete problems should replace theoretical abstractions in the language of the political left. He writes that

> It would be a good idea to stop talking about “the anticapitalist struggle” and to substitute something banal and untheoretical—something like “the struggle against avoidable human misery.” More generally, I hope that we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation. I suggest we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes. (1998a, p. 229)

It would be reasonable for us to wonder what Rorty thinks are the chances for improving things in the long term, and he tells us:

> As Marx and Foucault helped us see, today’s chains are often forged from the hammers that struck off yesterday’s. As Foucault was more inclined to admit than Marx, this sequence of hammers into chains is unlikely to end with the invention of hammers that cannot be forged into chains—hammers that are purely rational, with no ideological alloy. Still, the chains might, with luck, get a little lighter and easier to break each time. (1998a, p. 320)

Thus, according to Rorty, humanity is fated to go through cycles in which a changed political-economic system frees people from some of the fetters of the old, then itself becomes a source of unfreedom and abuse. This means that people working for constructive social change can only expect small-scale improvements, which may be reversed later. In addition to this description of change, Rorty’s view of human behavior can be summarized in three ways: he sees it as largely materialist, since the primary motives are greed and selfishness (exercise of power becomes a technique for achieving an end, not the end in itself); he posits that the objective of private or public action on the part of those who hold
progressive, humanist sentiments is to reduce cruelty and suffering; and he avoids detailed discussion of governmental structures and processes that facilitate or counter greed and selfishness.

Rorty is addressing human behavior that relates to societal conditions, and of course there are many potential causes for behavior. One is the desire for power, the wish to control, to dominate. This desire is often connected to greed and selfishness, since control can be used to gain economic advantage (for example, a politician who takes kickbacks from contractors in exchange for voting to give them city-funded projects). It may also stand on its own and it may be used for constructive purposes by someone who wants to change things for the better (such as the administrator of an environmental agency who cares about the future of the environment). Michel Foucault expressed the potential for a destructive desire to control through the term “fascism.” As David John Farmer notes (1995, pp. 230–231), a reader may misconstrue this term, thinking it only applies to particular countries during a particular era, but Foucault’s purpose is to describe a common human tendency, not a governmental system. He warns against

the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. . . . How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior? (Foucault, 1983, xiii)

There may indeed be no universal, timeless characteristics of human nature. It could be that motivations such as greed, selfishness, or “fascism” are learned features in specific cultures that could be altered over time if people so wished. However, on observed, empirical grounds it can be said that many societal ills result from behaviors based on these motivations, and that in the public, governmental sector much dysfunctional behavior can be traced to greed, selfishness, and the excesses of control and dominance. As we think about using progressive values in public administration to counter these tendencies, it is good to be realistic about the possibilities. Cheryl Simrell King and Lisa Zanetti (2005, pp. 137–138) emphasize that engaging in social change requires patience and tenacity. This is particularly true in a society increasingly organized to resist change. Herbert Marcuse wrote the sentences below sometime around 1970 (published for the first time in 2001; Marcuse died in 1979), and were he alive today, it is almost certain he would find this situation has intensified. Marcuse wrote that
Today, to be realistic means to be pessimistic: the concentration of power in the hands of the defenders of the status quo has never been greater; they are ready to use all available means against the increasing threat. And these means are unprecedented. (2001b, p. 139)

In addition to barriers associated with institutions and the powerful, it can also be challenging to show people alternatives to the current situation. Marcuse writes (in 1968) of the language of the established status quo:

Today, it is a language of unprecedented brutality and sweetness in one, an Orwellian language which, holding a practical monopoly in the means of communication, stifles the consciousness, obscures and defames the alternative possibilities of existence, implants the needs of the status quo in the mind and body of men and makes them all but immune against the need for change. (2001a, p. 118)

(Author’s note: I have not changed or marked with “sic” use of the masculine gender, here or elsewhere; it is understood this was common practice at the time and would not be acceptable today.)

**Immanent Critique in the American Context**

The narrative above clearly shows concern about conditions in society, especially as they affect governance, implying that actions are being taken that violate some conception of acceptable norms of behavior. This begs the question of what, or whose, norms, and how they are justified or grounded conceptually. This analysis of current conditions, and the later discussion of imagining alternatives, are grounded in critical social theory, a body of thought often associated with a preference for radical social change, moving from liberal-democratic-capitalist society (or any sort of society) to something else that would supposedly be better. However, this discussion is not about a systemic shift, which would be interesting in theory but only distantly related to the daily practice of public administration. Instead, this is an “immanent” perspective on constructive social change, a perspective that evaluates a society on its own terms, without recourse to standards taken from another time or place. It seeks to identify contradictions between expectations for governance—taken from the nation’s history—and present-day reality.

This critical approach involves examination of power, hierarchy, and
the imposition of private values and interests on others. It is not necessarily intended to eliminate these conditions and relationships, but rather to give people knowledge of their situation which can be used in public decision-making processes. As noted in the beginning of the chapter, we adopt an “inside” perspective on public administration, one that does not contrast the current political-legal-economic order with other possibilities, but instead explores what people in public administration might do to create constructive social change within the existing order. So, for example, if an identified problem is that elected officials in local government reflect the interests of land developers rather than a sustainable community future, solutions explored are more likely to focus on what public service practitioners might do to increase community awareness than on whether the structure of “overhead” democracy has outlived its usefulness.

Economic and political systems, including institutions and consti-
tutions, are human-made, thus changeable. The goal in this narrative is not to debate at the level of political theory the advantages and disadvantages of one or more of these features of society versus others, but to identify ways people in public administration can help improve the systems in which they work. In a broad sense this is “conservative,” since the matter at hand is not radical system change but incremental improvement. For public administration, though, this is not conservative, because public administration is an “instrumental” field of professional practice, the implementation arm of governmental policies and programs which, along with the administrative systems themselves, are created by elected leaders.

When public administration practitioners and academicians advocate social change, they energize the tension between “politics” (the process of arriving at societal goals, involving the public and elected representatives) and “administration” (the implementation of societal goals by public agencies), prompting debate about the appropriate role for public administration in a democratic society. In many cases the views of people in public administration may be closer than those of elected officials to the views a majority of citizens would express if given full information and an opportunity to participate in the policy process. Even so, there is a clear distinction between advocating for social change through the medium of policies, resource allocation, and operating systems, and claiming it is time to circumvent or alter the legal-institutional order. For practitioners, circumventing that order would include, for example,
disobeying laws or policies or seeking public support by forming constituencies separate from those of elected leaders. For academicians, proposals to alter the legal-institutional order could include, for example, enhancing administrative legitimacy within the Constitutional system, moving from overhead democracy to direct democracy or to network or technocratic governance, shifting to a socialist system, and so on. These are all important and interesting ideas but they are not the focus of our narrative, since we choose here to discuss the possibilities for change from within the existing legal-institutional order.

So, the conceptual framework of the book is both critical and immanent; it assumes that power, hierarchy, and private interest may shape public policies and processes in ways that contradict societal expectations, it searches for alternatives to make things better, and it does so from within the existing order. This framework does not require abandoning the emancipatory idea that injustice and inequity can be meliorated through significant social change, since change from within may cumulatively result in alteration of legal and institutional structures and processes. The mechanism for initiating change is imagining alternative futures, scenarios that are different from the status quo (Box, 2005, chap. 1). This may sound exotic, but it is a standard technique found in areas of practice such as land-use planning and strategic planning. It can be applied to narrow, focused issues (making streets in a business district more attractive; improving the usefulness of social-service assistance to clients; encouraging local landowners to protect an endangered species) and to larger-scale issues (envisioning a community’s approach to a “green,” sustainable future; influencing public policies on “welfare” in the direction of a just society; changing the legal mandate and culture of a resource-management agency from serving an industry to serving the public interest).

This leaves unanswered the matter of how to identify expectations for the public sector against which to compare current conditions. It is one thing to say that an immanent critique is based on contradictions between historical-cultural expectations and today’s events. It is another thing to specify in advance what those expectations are, so my response to the question of how expectations are to be identified may disappoint some readers.

Other than noting that expectations come from the political and economic history of the society, it is difficult to find universal, generally agreed-upon principles for action that will apply in all situations. When
one writes, “the political and economic history of the society,” one is referring to a complex, differentiated body of events and interpretations and it can be anticipated that a number of people will respond by asking, “whose history?” History, like the “named groups” discussed above (citizens, elected officials, practitioners, corporations, people with wealth and power, elites, and so on) is not monolithic but instead almost infinitely differentiated. There is disagreement in reconstructing past events and associated ideas, plus there are differences in interpretation of the meaning of those events and ideas.

A recent book by Anne-Marie Slaughter (2007) illustrates the problem of specifying historical concepts that can be used to inspire contemporary action. Slaughter identifies seven values of importance for Americans, drawn from the nation’s history: liberty, democracy, equality, justice, tolerance, humility, and faith. As we might expect, Slaughter goes to some lengths to describe the varied and conflicting experiences and interpretations people in past eras and today have attached to each of these concepts, since one person’s democracy, equality, justice, and so on can be another’s oppression or exclusion. (The concept “democracy” is a good example; for a discussion of its meaning in public administration, see Box, 2004, chap. 3, and 2007a, “Introduction.”) Slaughter’s project is ambitious and interesting, and it is useful to read her interpretation of key American ideals.

I choose not to be so ambitious, in part because the scope of this book (progressive values in public administration) is narrower than Slaughter’s, and in part because I am uncertain about the coherence and usefulness of unitary, single-term concepts, except as they are used within particular contexts. This uncertainty comes from the complexity and often disputed nature of large-scale ideas that are intended to spread over many people for long spans of time. It is not that ideas such as democracy or equality are unimportant—I have written about them, too—but that, where possible, I would like to distinguish between naming them as contested concepts along a continuum (for example, democratic self-governance versus centralized, closed, or authoritarian forms of governance) and using them as normative goals in unitary form (“democracy”).

History is a dialectical process, multiple and elusive. Features of society that appear fixed and unmovable contain the seeds of change into something quite different, whether or not change occurs. Historical values and concepts influence contemporary conditions and events (for example, the ideas of the Federalists and Anti-Federalists can be found in today’s
political debates (Allen, Lloyd, & Lloyd, 1985) and in the neighborhood movement in local government (Box & Musso, 2004), but can do so in a variety of ways, often conflicting and unpredictable.

In this book, the progressive values suggested as normative goals in public administration are drawn from observation of recent events, knowledge of ideas that have been important to some people in certain periods of time, and personal assessment of the need for social change. They are acknowledged to be non-foundational, disputed, and of interest only to some people in some times and places. Care is taken to draw multiple meanings from historical-cultural concepts behind the values, acknowledging the difficulties of interpretation and generalization. None of this should diminish the importance or usefulness of the idea of progressive values, nor the passion for change it expresses.
Describing the Value Pairs

Often you get the best insights by considering extremes—by thinking of the opposite of that with which you are directly concerned.

—C. Wright Mills
_The Sociological Imagination_
(1959, p. 213)

As militarism, the arrogance of power, and the euphemisms required to justify American imperialism inevitably conflict with America’s democratic structure of government and distort its culture and basic values, I fear that we will lose our country.

—Chalmers Johnson
_The Sorrows of Empire_
(2004, p. 13)

Those of us who lean away from reason and rationality and toward something else (whatever that may be) have received a resounding wake-up call in the last few years.

—Cheryl Simrell King
(2005, p. 523)
To the extent that ideas of “the public interest” and “the public welfare” are eroded, the more problematic becomes an enterprise labeled *Public Administration*.

—Dwight Waldo

*The Enterprise of Public Administration*

(1980, p. 78)

Each of the five regressive-progressive value pairs is examined in detail in this chapter. It is this portion of the book that most clearly focuses on societal critique, based on critical social theory. As noted in Chapter 1, critical analysis of contradictions between current conditions and historical values and expectations, plus discussion of alternative futures, can be uncomfortable for some people. It is essential to begin here, though. We know there are many things in society that we like and would not want to change, but the question at hand is what can be done to make things better—posing answers to this question requires exploring problematic aspects of the status quo. In the two chapters that follow, attention turns to ways of creating change. For now, we need to enter the perspective of critical analysis, probing challenging and difficult areas of contemporary institutions, policies, and administrative operations.

**Aggressiveness/Cooperation**

A certain amount of competition, distinction between high and low performance, and assertiveness seems necessary for people, organizations, and society to function well and achieve goals. The same can be said for cooperation, suppressing the desire to outperform or dominate others and instead working together for a greater good. On a continuum of aggressiveness and cooperation there can be a point at which these characteristics slip out of balance, so that competition and assertiveness become aggressiveness. This can be potentially threatening and damaging to quality of life or life itself. Occasional aggressiveness may not be too serious, if it means that sometimes people treat each other in a somewhat unpleasant way. However, if it means that interpersonal relationships, organizational behavior, and international affairs become rough or violent, with disregard for the lives and circumstances of others, there is a significant problem to be addressed.
It appears to me that there is a contemporary trend toward aggressiveness that has important effects on the public sector and governance. It is in evidence in the quality of discourse on public affairs, from talk radio to discussions at public meetings, and it can be found in phenomena such as threats against judges, police abuse of prisoners, intolerance toward minorities of all kinds, crime and disregard for the lives and rights of others, military abuse of detainees and of civilians in war zones, bureaucratic behavior toward citizens, politicians and political appointees who use their positions for personal gain, and so on.

An objection could be raised that any and all of these things may be found at various points in the nation’s history, and there is no question that this is true. America’s history includes aggressive political speech and behavior as well as clashes between citizens and between citizens and government; examples include Shays’ Rebellion in the 1780s, the Whiskey Rebellion in the 1790s, vigilante lynchings of political opponents in San Francisco and violent clashes between political groups in New York in the 1850s (Ryan, 1997), race-related violence and riots throughout the nation’s history, and so on. The corruption and personal misbehavior of politicians is a story found throughout the nation’s history, as are political attitudes that favor war, concentration of wealth, shortsighted degradation of the environment, and limitations on the life opportunities of ordinary people. Careless, callous, and self-seeking behavior by bureaucracies is not a new phenomenon either, and examples appear in the news often enough to feed the longstanding public perception.

All that said, we might hope that people would learn from history, teaching the young what has gone before and how public affairs can be conducted using processes, laws, and institutional structures that treat others fairly, kindly, justly. This does not appear to be happening, thus the observation that enacted values in society seem to be shifting toward the aggressive end of the continuum. People may be expected to regard aggressiveness as more acceptable when, from a young age, they are surrounded by violence in films, video games, and other media, and by militarism, foreign intervention, and a constant flow of news that portrays the nation in a state of war.

Many children spend hours each day playing electronic games that involve bashing and shattering bodies, pouring bullets into victims who scream and bleed. On television, they find hours of fake wrestling, with huge, bellowing players spewing hate and revenge; they see extreme fighting, with two men in a cage battering each other until one cannot
continue; and they view sports events such as football in which massive armored contestants on the field of battle crash into one another, to the cheers of fans whipped up in competitive excitement. They go to the movies and see cute hobbits (in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) in the midst of a series of bloody battles in which opponents are skewered and body parts severed, with blood flowing everywhere. In films and television shows, they see portrayals of aggressive behaviors in organizations, including governmental agencies. In their communities they watch young adults leaving for war, see television news images of real combat, observe bumper stickers everywhere urging them to “support the troops,” and hear of countless civilians killed by U.S. technology, from a distance—death and destruction as a real-life video game.

Today’s culture is saturated with violence in a way that it was not in earlier times. The world is a violent place and the twentieth century was by far the bloodiest in history. Nevertheless, I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and the violence I saw consisted of war movies and documentaries from World War II (for example, John Wayne movies and *Victory at Sea*), horror films from the 1930s and 1940s (Lon Chaney, Boris Karloff), Western films and television shows (Roy Rogers, the Lone Ranger), police shows like Dragnet, and comic books about crime-fighting characters such as Superman. By comparison with the 24/7 diet of explicit violence available today, this was tame stuff, capgun pistols, monster makeup, and ketchup-packet bullet wounds. Kay Hymowitz (2003, p. 233) put it nicely:

> An adolescent today who spends 6 or more hours a day seeped in the anarchic, vengeful fantasies of rap music, violent movies, computer games, and Internet chat rooms has little in common with the boy who loved horror comics in 1954. The boy who loved horror comics lived during a time when he continually bumped against a culture that refused to endorse the reality they represented.

The question is whether people raised in today’s setting can become relatively insensitive to the effects of interpersonal and institutional violence and whether they will think that aggressiveness is an acceptable and useful way to behave. Research has shown that children respond to constant exposure to violence in video games, films, and other media with aggressive behavior and attitudes (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2003). For example, Anderson, Gentile, and Buck-
ley found that adolescents who play a greater number of violent video games “hold more pro-violent attitudes, have more hostile personalities, are less forgiving, believe violence to be more typical, and behave more aggressively in their everyday lives” (2007, 83). In the long term, some of these children will be public-sector professionals, political leaders, military officers, K-12 teachers, and university professors, people who may influence the course of public affairs.

People who are in those positions today have an opportunity, however small, restricted, and difficult, to alter the direction of this trend or at least to moderate its effects. They can teach and model the value of cooperation, which has always been present in society alongside aggressiveness. It can be found in areas such as neighborhood organization, citizen involvement, cooperative organizational leadership and management techniques, and programmatic approaches to public issues large and small, federal, state, and local.

In the meantime, we are faced with demonstrations of the regressive value of aggressiveness at many levels and on a grand scale that will be difficult to counter. The militarization of American society makes the idea of violence as a way to address problems so pervasive that it is difficult to avoid. Herbert Marcuse wrote that the militarization of society is “the most conspicuous social mobilization of aggressiveness,” which “goes far beyond the actual draft of manpower and the buildup of the armament industry” (1968, p. 259). It will be useful to explore, in brief, the development of the militarized society and current manifestations.

In the 1950s, C. Wright Mills described the influence of the military elite. He noted that the United States was founded in a context of fear of military influence, since “A young country whose nationalist revolution was fought against mercenary soldiers, employed by the British and quartered in American homes, would not be likely to love professional soldiers” (1956, p. 175). A full-time army was considered a threat to liberty. Thomas Jefferson decreased appropriations for the fledgling U.S. Navy, in part because navies “extended a nation’s hostile boundaries and thus its likelihood of stumbling into war” (McDonald, 1976, p. 43).

According to Mills, by the middle of the twentieth century, “all over the world, the warlord is returning. All over the world, reality is defined in his terms . . . in America, too, into the political vacuum the warlords have marched. . . . [They] have gained and have been given increased power to make and to influence decisions of the gravest consequence” (1956, p. 171). In his farewell speech in January 1961, President Dwight
Eisenhower raised an alarm about the “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry” with “economic, political, even spiritual” influence “in every city, every state house, every office of the Federal Government.” He urged Americans to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex,” because “the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist” (1999, p. 448). These two people with very different life experiences, writing and speaking just a few years apart at the dawn of a new era of militarism in America, understood what was happening in mid-century. This is remarkable; most Americans today seem unaware they live in a militarized society that uses armed force to dominate international relations.

The situation described by Mills and Eisenhower is one in which militarism becomes an essential, inextricable part of economic and political systems. Economic progress comes to depend on defense and war expenditures, military industry lobbyists influence public budgeting and foreign policy decisions, expansion of global corporations depends on the protection provided by U.S. military forces and bases abroad, broadcast media corporations emphasize nationalistic perspectives, and the population comes to accept the idea that America is defined by its willingness to use the military to force other peoples to do its bidding. Mobilization becomes a permanent fact of life, “for the enemy is permanent” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 51), whether it is communism or terrorism.

Though Mills, Eisenhower, and others warned some time ago of the coming militarization of America, the United States had intervened in other countries many times before and has done so since, often to overthrow other governments or suppress popular revolts, for purposes of protecting the financial interests of U.S. businesses or to secure influence in places that might later prove useful to financial or strategic interests (Boggs, 2005; Kinzer, 2006). Today, this international extension of military force includes construction and maintenance of hundreds of military bases in other countries (737 of them in 2005 in more than 130 countries, 38 of which are valued at $1.584 billion or more, plus a number of bases that are not openly acknowledged; Johnson, 2006, pp. 5–6, 139), with hundreds of thousands of personnel. A number of these bases are located to support efforts to extract oil and gas (Johnson, 2004, pp. 181–185). In 2004, the military budget for the United States was approximately 49 percent of all military/defense spending worldwide (GlobalSecurity.org, 2007).
Stagnant economies in the 1970s in the United States and Britain “allowed for the rise of conservative political parties and leaders—Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher” (Johnson, 2004, p. 259) and a reshaping of the American role in the world. In a return to nineteenth-century capitalist theory,

This meant withdrawing the state as much as possible from participation in the economy, opening domestic markets at least in principle to international trade and foreign investment, privatizing investment in public utilities and natural resources, ending most protective labor laws, enacting powerful domestic and international safeguards for private property rights, including, above all, “intellectual property rights” (that is, patents of all sorts), and enforcing conservative fiscal policies even at the expense of the public’s health and welfare. (Johnson, 2004, pp. 259–260)

This economic theory became known as “neoliberalism” or “globalization.” Internationally,

Neoliberalism has been with us now for some three decades. During that time it has become, albeit unevenly, the dominant logic of policymaking in most countries. It has colonized social democratic and conservative parties alike and brought about “an historic victory of capital over labour” (quoting Berger, 1999, p. 453). (Cahill, 2007, p. 221)

International financial institutions created by the United States following World War II have been used to pressure other countries into adopting this economic agenda, opening themselves to foreign trade including agricultural products from the United States, cutting spending on social welfare, and allowing foreign investors to purchase a nation’s “state-owned enterprises, such as electric power, telephone, transportation, natural resources, and energy companies.” The result has been the near or actual economic failure of a number of countries, which are then “forced to rely on U.S. corporations to provide virtually all consumer products, employment, and even public services” (Johnson, 2004, p. 267).

In the 1990s, the United States pursued this project using trade agreements, the workings of international financial organizations, and the implied power of the military. However, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the “neoconservatives” became impatient. Under the cover story of the “war on terror,” the military is now used overtly to intimidate and if need be to occupy nations that seem to threaten
U.S. global dominance and commercial interests. As the sole remaining superpower, the United States is able to renounce international treaties and accepted practices relating to violence and treatment of civilians and prisoners, declaring that it will suppress military competition and conduct preemptive wars when it sees fit. The linkage of military power and economic interests seems complete.

Stephen Kinzer (2006, p. 315) writes of the justification for this militarism that Americans “are the only ones in modern history who are convinced that by bringing their political and economic system to others, they are doing God’s work.” Roger Betsworth (1990, chap. 5) contrasts two views of the mission of America in the world. One is “exemplary,” constructed of religious and Enlightenment narratives requiring Americans to be an example to the world. This was the view held by Thomas Jefferson and others of the Founding Era. The other view is “evangelical.” According to Betsworth, the founding generation “were not obsessed with the unique character of America” (p. 112), but by the middle of the nineteenth century, people were convinced of American superiority and “believed that God had created America and called her to establish democracy throughout the world” (p. 113).

The public has shown itself willing to accept violence against ordinary people in other societies when it is characterized as necessary to “keep the homeland safe.” It would be comforting to believe in a civilized society in which people make independent judgments on public matters, based on a preference for humane and rational behavior (“rational” in the limited sense of action based on knowledge of existing conditions, goals, and capabilities, rather than ideological predispositions). Instead, a small controlling faction is able to “sell” the majority an image of the nation and of other peoples based on fear and violence. This image serves the faction’s financial and ideological interests, combining neoclassical economics and commercial militarism in a deadly mixture supported by a culture of competitiveness and aggressiveness, social inequality, nationalism/patriotism, and mystical/superstitious thinking that overcomes the voices of intellectuals and scientists in a “defamation of alternative modes of thought which contradict the established universe of discourse” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 173). There is little possibility of internal checks on this behavior, since “a vast army of undercover agents is spread over the entire country and through all branches of society. Congress has been emasculated (or rather, has emasculated itself) before the executive power which, in turn, depends on its vast military establishment” (Marcuse,
This was written of the Vietnam Era; there is a lesson here in the continuity of societal conditions.

This situation is supported by an environment that purges from public awareness a knowledge of historical underpinnings and the potential for alternative ways of living. Even select, well-educated groups are subject to this cleansing of alternative perspectives. For example, few graduate students in American public administration are aware that the current governmental system is the result of a spirited debate over class, power, privilege, and the nature of democracy, and that the underlying value conflicts remain in play. Public administration scholars are increasingly tracked by cues in the professional environment into, for example, studying how to measure agency performance rather than how to examine what an agency does and why.

In local communities, increasing emphasis is placed on news, discussion, and civic events related to “the troops,” to people preparing for military service, to people currently serving, to their families, to fears about terrorist events and infiltration. Though any society would want to devote some energy to preventing attacks by unseen adversaries, given the range of existing problems to be addressed, this one, especially in areas outside a few major cities, would logically be of moderate to low priority. However, it serves a purpose in distracting people from high-priority issues that would require redistribution of wealth downward instead of upward or slow the making of profits through destructive resource extraction. With this increasing emphasis on commercial militarism, the conceptual universe of possibilities and alternatives seems to be narrowing with time rather than expanding.

Particularly troubling from the perspective of aggressiveness in society is the extent to which American thought about politics and economics is now linked to violence, aggression, war, and the extension of commercial empire through the use of armed force. From life on the inner-city streets, to the aspirations of middle and working-class youth, to government grants to universities, to business opportunities in the “defense” industries, to media coverage and television and film, to reduced possibilities for government intervention in domestic affairs because of political attitudes and lack of funds due to war, and so on indefinitely, the nation is increasingly harnessed to the value of aggressiveness. This is not a matter of denying the need for a highly trained and technologically advanced military. In the world as it is, this is essential. It is, though, a matter of honestly assessing the impacts of an economy and political system de-
pendent on a huge military establishment and a citizenry trained from birth to accept, to believe in, a militarized society.

In the long term, it appears that the contradiction between the sources of cooperative, peaceful action during the nation’s history and current conditions and likely future events is intensifying. Sources of cooperative and peaceful action can be found, for example, in movements to end wars, gain voting rights for women and civil rights for minorities, organize community centers (Mattson, 1998) and neighborhoods (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Follett, 1998), bring the interests of labor and management into harmony, and so on. In public administration, a number of authors have advocated moving away from elite-dominated hierarchical systems, toward structures and processes that better accommodate diverse and multiple interests and needs (see, for example, Box, 1998, 2005; Farmer, 1995, 2005; McSwite, 1997, 2002).

I do not want to suggest a general, unifying theory of cooperative society in this book, in part for the reason that any particular theory forecloses other possibilities, however attractive it may be, and in part because others have already taken on this project. (For me, an interesting example is Herbert Marcuse’s imagined post-capitalist society that eliminates domination and “surplus” repression [1955] and “projects the convergence of technology and art and the convergence of work and play” [1970, p. 68].) Mostly, I want to stay with the framework described in Chapter 1, finding ways for public service practitioners and scholars to move societal conditions toward progressive values within the current political-legal-economic order. This suggests a broad definition of the progressive value of cooperation that includes attitudes and behaviors connected with a peaceful common good rather than a turbulent search for power, domination, and advantage. This does not mean surrendering individuality, creativity, or personal initiative, but instead expressing them in ways that benefit society as a whole.

I cannot connect examples of aggressiveness causally to characteristics of society and would not attempt a general explanatory model of the effects of aggressiveness. However, it seems logical to assume that a society in which the people, and especially children, are constantly exposed to aggressive attitudes and actions will be one in which adults behave in these ways, in homes, organizations, government, and ultimately internationally. What is happening with commercial militarism seems remote from the daily lives of many of us, but though we may benefit in the short term from relatively inexpensive imports or gaso-
line, there may be a price to pay for what is being done with our money and in our name. Much the same can be said about the media and film industries, methods of organizational and personnel management, and so on—there are reasons for aggressive practices in these areas, but in the long term the results may not be what we want. As is true of most readers, my ability to create change is limited, but if we are aware of the issues and do what we can in our daily lives to encourage a shift from the aggressiveness end of the continuum to the cooperative end, perhaps the future will be different.

Belief/Knowledge

For the past several years in the United States, many of the actions of the national government have been guided by predetermined beliefs rather than acquisition and interpretation of knowledge about the phenomena at hand. This has occurred in a wide range of management areas, such as public lands, the health and welfare of the public, conditions in inner cities, internal security, the environment, and international affairs. Available knowledge has been ignored when it contradicts predetermined policy positions, and working relationships with institutions and nations have been swept aside to accommodate unilateral action based on predetermined doctrine. Focusing specifically on recent developments can be problematic because some of these practices may be changed relatively soon and because they may not be in evidence in all parts of the public sphere. However, to the extent these recent developments at the national level illustrate a tendency—possibly a trend—that affects many parts of society over the long term, they highlight a turn toward regressive values that is worth addressing. Beyond current trends, too, the problem of acting on belief rather than knowledge repeats throughout history, so that people of an older generation might reasonably think they have a responsibility to pass on to younger people the lessons of the past.

Particularly in an age of electronic media, citizens are distracted from pressing public problems by symbolic issues, spectacle and entertainment, and cover stories. Addressing public problems meaningfully would require reversal of the current process of redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, so these techniques are used to divert attention from the economic agenda. Examples of symbolic issues are gay marriage, flag burning, abortion, and stem-cell research. Spectacle and entertainment include the sports described above and a television schedule and video
games saturated with graphic violence and crime. Examples of cover stories are supposed grave and imminent danger to the “homeland” (a strange choice of words, making one think of the blood-and-fatherland of Nazi Germany), exporting democracy, keeping the petroleum-based economy healthy, and exaggerated scares about global pandemics.

Using the distractions of symbolic issues, entertainment and spectacle, and cover stories spread by corporate-owned media, the public sector can be used to redistribute wealth upward while restricting the personal freedoms of action, expression, and privacy of those who might resist. Public actions become “wars” for this and that (war on drugs, war on terrorism, etc.), supporting stories that the nation is facing new and especially hazardous threats parallel in size, kind, and potential consequences to “real” wars (the kind started by other nations that threaten national existence; not its corporate dominance or lifestyle convenience, its existence). If it becomes obvious that a particular threat-story (fearsome weapons ready for use; two people of the same gender marrying; dark-skinned infiltrators; and so on) is exaggerated, bogus, or simply losing its scare value, a new one can be created and spread by the media. While tens of thousands of people are killed or disabled by automobile accidents, pointless wars, smoking, poverty, disease, consumption of deadly fast foods, and so on, and tens of thousands of lives are damaged by intolerance based on prejudice, religious dogma, or other sources of belief, it goes largely unnoticed that wealth is being moved from the bottom and middle of the socio-economic scale toward the top. In this way, people will have little time to give serious thought to conditions in society and what it means as a citizen to support the actions that create these conditions.

People in the developed world who would be upset at seeing or hearing of the ill-treatment, poor health, or death of just one child or adult whom they know will often support the destruction of the homes, cities, and lives of thousands of people in other places. People who would be outraged if police pushed their way into their homes support the idea of military units searching house to house in other countries, forcing families into the street at gunpoint. People who would attend meetings and protest loudly if a developer planned to tear out a local park may ignore or support large-scale environmental damage from, for example, clear-cutting, strip-mining, and excessive air and water pollution, provided that the economy is good and the resulting damage does not directly affect them. Those who might otherwise protest may be deterred by the threat of social sanction or government action. Constitutional protection of
individual liberties allows significant room for dissent and is especially valuable in a pluralistic society; but social conformity and curtailment of civil liberties can also be significant. Examples include the Alien and Sedition Acts during the Adams administration in the 1790s, the incarceration of American citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II, the McCarthy Era of the 1950s, the Vietnam Era of the 1960s and 1970s, and the period following September 11, 2001.

These conditions are often said to be evidence of citizen apathy and disengagement toward public affairs, and in part this is true. However, it has never been easy in large-scale urban-industrial society to involve a large percentage of people in public affairs in a meaningful way. When there are especially controversial issues at stake, the percentage of people voting will rise, but voting is a weak and limited form of engagement. It does not mean that people are well informed or that they have examined the issues critically and carefully, nor does it mean they will participate in other ways in public policy processes. C. B. Macpherson (1977) described the current political system as one of “equilibrium democracy,” in which elite oligopolies make the essential decisions. Drawing on Schumpeter, Macpherson characterized public will as “manufactured,” so that “the demand schedule for political goods is itself largely dictated by the suppliers” (pp. 90–91). Though it may be assumed that technology would offset this condition by making information available to the mass of people and give them a way to join together in resistance, technology may instead facilitate the public distraction and containment of dissent described above. This is an environment in which it becomes increasingly difficult for the public service practitioner to identify or mobilize a body of people to consider and advise on current issues; elsewhere, I have called this the “problem of finding a public” (Box, 2005, chap. 7).

Today, corporatized, bureaucratic, organizational society hosts urban masses of people disconnected from the physical environment, dependent on complex and fragile communication and technology systems for survival. The strained character of huge urban systems becomes apparent with emergencies related to power outages, strikes by transit workers, and violent acts and disasters. Much human work continues to be controlled, repetitive, and uncreative, carried out for the benefit of a few. Technology is used mostly to support consumerism rather than to alleviate the living conditions facing large portions of the world’s population. Despite the apparent submergence of individuality and responsibility in group identity, popular culture glorifies the individual
and people look for strong father-figure leaders or turn to expressions of parochial loyalty—to community, nation, or religion—for relief from the “postmodern condition.”

In an article on the impact, ten years later, of Charles Fox and Hugh Miller’s book *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse* (1995), Cheryl Simrell King (2005) observes that people in contemporary society are turning away from the reason and fact-based empiricism characteristic of modernity, to faith, certainty, and ideological purpose characteristic of premodernism. In the void of meaning presented by postmodern society, people want clear and simple answers. Such answers may be unrelated to the nature of current events and conditions and may result in damage to other people and the environment, but ideological certainty overrides these concerns. This phenomenon is particularly evident at present in the American national government and in parts of the world where religion is especially powerful; these are only current manifestations of a phenomenon that recurs with some regularity and in different places.

The value pair belief/knowledge is intended to express the difference between public sector action based on stable, certain, predetermined ideas, and action based on evaluation of experience, evidence, and articulated purpose. It is not intended to resurrect old debates about how and what people know and what is or is not real, but instead to express a continuum, from decision and action grounded in fixed certainty, to decision and action grounded in an open and flexible relationship to the factual context and to interpretations of reality found in public dialogue on issues of importance. That is not to suggest a mushy or unclear view of values, but instead acceptance of the complexity of the social world and the diversity of perspectives. It is assumed that theories and principles are contingent understandings that can be modified because of new information or experience, and assumed, too, that there is no place to turn for concrete absolutes as guidance. This is a pragmatic position, consistent with an admonition by Charles Sanders Peirce “to maintain an attitude of doubt and openness,” a “cautious attitude that he calls ‘fallibilism’” (Campbell, 1995, p. 16).

We all have beliefs, ideas that express our understanding of the world around us. They are problematic in public-sector governance when they become fixed and impervious to change. As I ask the reader to consider my argument that the world would be a better place with a bit more emphasis on progressive instead of regressive values, I cannot give a reason
other than personal preference. I do not “believe” this preference to be justifiable if that would mean resorting to some outside authority, some absolute source such as a philosopher, scientific finding, or religion, asserting that I have found truth and anyone who disagrees is wrong. Nor would I believe it to be justifiable if that means the idea is beyond the influence of discussion and debate with others who are also interested. What remains for me to believe is that progressive values are connected to public actions and social conditions that I prefer to those connected to regressive values. Past experiences and socialization have given me a preference for progressive values and I am appealing in the book to others with a similar preference. What is and what is not progressive is a matter for individual thought in specific circumstances and it is always open to new knowledge and alternative interpretations.

This contrasts with certainty of belief, a closed predisposition that screens out new knowledge and experience. In its more extreme forms, belief can produce idealism based on illusion, fantasy, and superstition. Certainty of belief can be exhibited by people with preferences for any sort of political or economic system, whether “liberal,” “conservative,” “progressive,” “socialist,” or whatever; in the past few decades, public affairs in the United States have been dominated by ideas commonly labeled “conservative” or “neoliberal.” Though some people who consider themselves conservative or classical liberal dislike the way these words are used in the current mainstream, there is a general understanding of the ideology involved. It is people who believe in this ideology who, for example, screened out extant knowledge of Iraq and the Middle East, with disastrous results. This problem extends to a range of policy areas in which ideology blocks progress toward solving public problems; it does so by denying descriptions of reality, ignoring science, devaluing expertise and intellectual accomplishment, shutting off public dialogue, and using aggressive tactics to defeat opponents (Schudson, 2006, pp. 499–500). Not surprisingly, this sort of bullying and ignorance often leads to public actions divorced from reality, which serve to strengthen regressive values.

The values continuum of belief and knowledge describes a commitment, on one end, to belief in received ideas and certainty despite evidence, and on the other end, to exploration and public questioning of accumulated knowledge and experience. It is understood that everyone has value preferences; the question is whether in the sphere of public action those preferences are to be tested and shaped by interpretations
base on knowledge and open discourse, or whether they are to be forced on others despite current conditions and diversity of views. We have every reason to be pessimistic about the possibilities for public action based on knowledge rather than belief. Even so, we can be inspired by the optimistic view John Dewey expressed eighty years ago, as he described a future in which principles and theories are considered not as ends but as “tools of inquiry,” and “policies and proposals for social action [will] be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed” (1927, pp. 202–203). In such circumstances,

Differences of opinion in the sense of differences of judgment as to the course which it is best to follow, the policy which it is best to try out, will still exist. But opinion in the sense of beliefs formed and held in the absence of evidence will be reduced in quantity and importance. No longer will views generated in view of special situations be frozen into absolute standards and masquerade as eternal truths. (Dewey, 1927, p. 203)

**Economics as End/Economics as Means**

Human beings live in a physical environment of relatively scarce resources in relation to population levels and they compete for control of those resources. The result is that for many people, daily life consists of acquiring basics such as food, shelter, and clothing, while others are able to move beyond this, enjoying the benefits of education and material well-being. It can be argued that there exists enough for all if those with plenty would share, so that in a just world everyone would have more than what they need to survive. That has never been the reality nor is it today, so for purposes of analysis we can accept the proposition that a significant portion of the world’s population deals with what we might call a hostile resource environment.

Years ago I had a professor in a doctoral seminar who began the course by saying that he thought all human behavior was reducible to economics, money, exchange. Several of my classmates were upset, even angry, about this materialist view and the professor admitted later that he said it to provoke those of us who were soft-headed public service types into thinking a bit more critically. I did not disagree with the professor, though I thought he overstated the case, and I was surprised at the response of my classmates. It is not difficult to find an economic motivation or rationale behind much human activity and it is clear that a significant part of social construction is dependent upon economic
thought and action. Given this, it would seem that resisting knowledge about economics is counterproductive; one need not like the extent and influence of economistic thought and behavior to realize how important it is for understanding contemporary institutions and public governance. (By “economics” I do not mean formal study, theories, or an academic discipline, but the broad idea that human behavior is organized around competition for resources and calculation of costs and benefits associated with particular actions.)

The value continuum of economics as end/economics as means is not intended as a theoretical critique of the economic basis of society, but as a way to examine the balance between regressive and progressive use of economic thought. Though I think some economic behavior should be more tightly regulated than it is in today’s America (especially actions that harm the environment) and the influence of economics on militarism and international relations is a serious problem, these are not the issues I wish to discuss here. Instead, I want to address the influence of economic thought on behavior and action inside public sector organizations.

It is a common observation that the public sector is increasingly dominated by economic rationality. Public choice theory beginning in the 1950s, privatization in the 1980s, the “hollowing out” of the state by contracting in the 1990s, and the effects of new public management, entrepreneurship, performance measurement, and so on are parts of a trend away from public action motivated by a mixed set of reasons to a stronger focus on calculative rationality (Box, 1999). This trend has affected both the practice of public administration and its scholarly study. The effects of the idea of “running government like a business” have been noted (Box, Marshall, Reed, & Reed, 2001) and books, articles, and new journals in public administration oriented toward an economic approach are evidence of the phenomenon. It may be argued that new public management is fading and the trendy rush toward economic rationality as the grounding for public administration practice and scholarship is fading as well. To me, this argument assumes that knowledge of alternatives is alive and well in the public consciousness, something of which I do not think we can be sure. The name of the latest incarnation of calculative rationality may change, but the underlying mechanism may not.

Several rationales for public action appear to have declined in prominence because of the focus on economic efficiency. Among these, we might highlight four: conformance to the Constitution and rule of law; transparency and accountability; social justice and social equity;
and participatory citizen self-governance. This is not to say that use of economic thought in public decision making automatically means these things will be slighted by adopted policies—a policy based on economic efficiency might fit nicely with each of these four reasons for public action. However, it is reasonable to expect that over time a narrow focus on economic efficiency will slight each of them, producing a changed public administration and a changed society. The sort of effects we might expect to see include intensification of problems associated with contracting out government services (accountability, quality, cost); increasing public alienation from and mistrust of government; increasing social inequality and injustice based on race, gender, and other forms of difference; and continued environmental degradation. There are complicating and countervailing forces in each of these areas so that economic rationality will not be the only thing that determines outcomes. For example, efforts by local government professionals to assist citizens in neighborhood organizations may help counter alienation, mistrust, and possibly social inequality and injustice. However, to the extent economic rationality is emphasized in the public sector, it will tend to have these regressive effects.

It is not surprising that economic rationality has become such an important feature of public action. This is consistent with the critical social theory description of “one-dimensional” society, in which economic rationality crowds out other ways of thinking and being, until there is little knowledge left of alternatives. In the United States during the twentieth century, government became something of a buffer between private sector excesses and the public. (This occurred in areas such as child labor, work hours, dangerous working conditions, poor wages, bullying and violence preventing union organizing, poor or non-existent pensions, poor health care, racial integration, gender equality, food and drug safety, air and water quality, urban sprawl, affordable housing.) This role for government has been under sustained attack for the past few decades and, in a global consumerist society, complaining of the ubiquitous presence of economic thought becomes quixotic. Many people are unaware of the conditions that existed before public sector action was taken to ameliorate them, so public reaction is muted when, for example, the national government opposes regulation of greenhouse gases, weakens protections for wetlands or endangered species, grants oil or gas drilling leases in environmentally sensitive areas, makes decisions that favor the pharmaceutical industry instead of public safety, and so on; and countless local governments
emphasize unlimited growth and economic favors for developers instead of planned, sustainable development with careful regulation and cost-sharing between the public and private sectors.

A corollary to economic rationality and running government like a business is the idea that sectoral boundaries are dissolving so that responsibility for making public policy is (and should be) increasingly distributed among groups and people outside the public sector, and the implementation of public policy is the same regardless of whether one answers to a private board of directors or a legislative body. If one takes a little time to think about this idea, it is really quite amazing. It downgrades the relevance of thousands of years of historical development of government and the relationship of the citizen to society in many cultures, the (remarkable and fascinating) story of the creation of the American republic, and the role of government in events such as the Progressive Era, the Great Depression and the New Deal, both world wars, and various social conditions and movements. It means regarding as relatively unimportant the political-legal structures of institutions, constitutions, charters, laws, and ordinances. It means deemphasizing the distinct duties, responsibilities, and ethical concerns that come with managing the public’s money and carrying out policies created by representatives of the public (however imperfect their reflection of a majority will that might exist were citizens to have access to information and take a meaningful part in the policy process). In sum, it means accepting the dominance of competitive calculative interests in the public sphere, largely setting aside the idea of something unique and important to human life in the capacity to collectively identify, decide on, and carry out actions that might create a better future for the public at large.

How could such a thing happen in the study of public administration? How does the public administration of Dwight Waldo, Minnowbrook, New Public Administration, the Blacksburg Manifesto, and so on, turn into the public administration of public choice economics, new public management, and the blurring of sectoral boundaries? Is it because this field has no clear disciplinary content? Is it because public administration borrows from other disciplines, facilitating the increasing influence of economic rationality? Have we come to a point where it is futile to complain about or resist the marketization of the public sphere?

The question at hand is whether economics should be the primary reason for public action, or instead one reason among several and a useful tool for carrying out policies created for other reasons. In part, this
is a question of type and level of action. There is any number of public functions in which economic rationality is and should be primary, in which government should indeed be run like a business. Examples include aspects of accounting, inventory control, fleet management, purchasing, investing, benefits administration, supervision and reporting, and so on. (Even within such routine, businesslike functions, though, there are expectations of behavior and accountability unique to the public sector. Accounting includes state laws requiring annual independent audits for each local government, with results made public. Fleet management involves implicit or explicit standards for personal use of public vehicles that might not be found in the private sector; and so on.)

However, the “big questions of public administration in a democracy” (Kirlin, 1995) are better answered using several perspectives. Public service practitioners considering how to address issues such as gender equity in employment practices, improving the life opportunities of social welfare clients, or providing citizens with information about environment-friendly planning practices of course need to be conscious of wise use of resources and the economic effects of alternative courses of action on people affected by their actions, including taxpayers. Even so, they may choose to draw also on concerns and interests only indirectly related to economics (Box, 1998, chap. 5; Van Wart, 1998). Public administration academicians considering issues to address and methodologies to use also make choices between different perspectives and may choose to focus on economic rationality or other concerns common in the public sphere. The broad point is that calculation of economic efficiency can be an important means to an end and sometimes it may be the end itself, but in public governance many other reasons, purposes, and preferences are important as well. This has always been true; it is suggested here that the balance on a continuum of economics as end and economics as means has moved further than we might want toward the regressive pole of economics as end.

There is, for me, a conceptual “elephant in the room” in this discussion of the influence of economics in the public sector. The elephant is the time-worn, some would say discredited idea of public interest. Running through the discussion above of economic rationality is the distinction, not unlike Schlesinger’s private interest and public purpose, between self-interested action and action intended to benefit a broader community. “Self-interested” can include more than personal benefit. It means benefit to a person, group, organization, or idea with which the person acting identifies. It can be compatible with aggregated individual preferences or the actions of an in-
individual political leader or public professional. It is consistent with pluralist or party politics and with administrative action that serves the interests of an agency, professional group, or professional perspective.

Action intended to benefit a broader community beyond self-interest is taken “in the public interest,” but what that means has been next to impossible to define. The term was made especially problematic by the work of Glendon Schubert (1957; 1960) and other writers several decades ago. Schubert (1957, p. 366) thought “that American writers in the field of public administration have evolved neither a unified nor a consistent theory to describe how the public interest is defined in administrative decision-making.” He also thought they had failed to create “theoretical models with the degree of precision and specificity which is necessary” for understanding “the actual behavior of real people” (p. 366). Frank Sorauf (1962, pp. 189–190) summarily dismissed the public interest as a useful concept for practice or study:

[practitioners of politics and academic political scientists] . . . need intellectual tools for discussing the morality and wisdom of political policy, not in vague moralizations and rationalizations, but in terms of identifiable results and consequences and in terms related to policy itself. . . . Perhaps the academicians ought to take the lead in drawing up a list of ambiguous words and phrases “which never would be missed.” For such a list I would have several candidates, but it should suffice here to nominate “the public interest.”

Despite the uncertainty of meaning, the term appears frequently in the literature of public affairs. Gerhard Colm (1962, p. 127) suggests why this might be so:

The vague concept of the public interest loses much of its vagueness as a result of political debates, judicial interpretations, and translations into specific goals of economic performance and achievement. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to imagine that politicians, statesmen, judges, and officials concerned with the formulation of government policies could do without this concept. Even a person who is wholly agnostic with respect to the public interest as a meta-sociological idea may find that the concept is needed at least as a working hypothesis, regardless of whether it corresponds to a “reality.”

Anthony Downs (1962, 4) identifies three functions of the concept of public interest in a democratic society. It can serve as a device for citizens
to judge governmental actions; a way to placate those whose personal interests are not served by the identified single common good; and a check on public officials as they make decisions. Since the time these people wrote about the public interest, others—not only authors working in a “conventional” mode, but also authors who might be considered postmodern, deconstructionist, and wary of undefined universals—can be found using the concept. It is understandable that, particularly in this era of economic rationality in public administration, there is a felt need to express a sense of meaning to public action beyond finding the cheapest way to deliver services.

Two common versions of the public interest are the substantive and aggregative models. It is the substantive, or strong, version that is so hard to define. It is the substantive public interest to which people refer when they speak or write about acting “in the public interest.” Though it is usually assumed the listener or reader will know what this is and agree that it is a good thing, as a concept it is often unclear and controversial. The aggregative model is a way to bring together economic rationality and the public interest, since it represents majority will at a specific point in time, such as when an opinion poll is taken, people cast votes in an election, or an administrator takes action based on an assessment of what she or he thinks most people want. It is a weak, “default” view of the public interest, since it requires no inquiry, accumulated knowledge, or informed thought about consequences for the larger community.

Another model focuses not on the substance of issues or aggregate opinion, but on the process of finding and acting on the identified public interest. In this model, citizens participate in discourse on public issues and together decide what to do. Each person brings her or his interests to the discussion, but in the process of sharing them and talking about alternatives, awareness of the ideas and circumstances of others may encourage people to change their positions, whether because of new knowledge or a sense of responsibility for the larger community. Instead of behaving as a package of pre-determined interests intent on protecting what they have in an adversarial setting, people contribute to building something meaningful with others.

A process approach to public administration can be found in the work of discourse theorists such as McSwite and Fox and Miller. O. C. McSwite (Orion White and Cynthia McSwain) describes a “process-based communitarian approach to governance” grounded in American history, in which “the connection of people to the community was relationship
rather than an ideologically distorted deference to the ideals of Truth and Good and to some inadequate actualizations of them that the members of the community were required to believe” (1996, p. 222). They find this approach in “the revolutionary spirit of the young nation, the government of the Articles of Confederation, and the philosophy of American Pragmatism” (p. 222).

Common examples of the process model of the public interest at work include citizen boards, commissions, committees, and neighborhood groups. A weakness of these process settings is that usually only a small percentage of the people who might be affected by policy decisions are participants. Another weakness is the potential for unequal power relationships among experts, bureaucrats, citizens, businesspeople, and elected leaders to distort the dialogue in favor of particular interests (Yankelovich, 1991). Fox and Miller (1995) write that “if the public conversation is to be something other than a playground for the mightiest, there must be norms of discourse commonly understood and a community that shares a forum of interaction where viewpoints may confront one another” (p. 158). There is a role for public professionals in moderating power relationships in discourse settings; they may “facilitate the discourse by getting disparate subgroups to speak the language of the public interest” (p. 158).

The process model of the public interest is useful for understanding how groups of people involved in public governance use knowledge, explore shared interests, and make decisions. It does not, though, help much in describing what the public interest is at a given point in time. As Sorauf noted, “here the public interest as means and procedure replaces the public interest as end and goal, and one is left with an understanding of the public interest which has little to do with the wisdom or morality of public policy itself” (1962, p. 185). Also, though the process model might be applied to procedural aspects of administrative action, it does little to clarify what the public interest means to public professionals themselves.

I think it is important to find a meaningful way to use the concept of the public interest in public administration. It is fine to note that the term is ill-defined, a generalization without clear meaning, an assumption of consensus where none exists. The substantive model seems vague and impractical, the aggregative model is “thin” and unsatisfying, and the process model does not yield a clear definition of the public interest. Still, people think the idea is meaningful and it continues to be used, so
it seems better to search for a description that can add something to the existing perspectives.

Elsewhere, I have suggested a redescription of the public interest based in part on recognition of the role of time, the temporal dimension (Box, 2007c). The substantive, aggregative, and process models of the public interest include assumptions about the nature of time: in the substantive model, the public interest is unchanging or changes over long intervals because of shifts in societal conditions; the aggregative model is a cross-sectional, one-time measure of individual preferences (such as voting or surveys); and the process model stretches across a span of time but lacks an independent conception of the public interest.

A public interest that changes slowly or not at all disregards the interests of those who disagree with it, so it is a recipe for discontent and conflict. With a relatively static, fixed public interest, laws or operating practices would be adopted based on a description of the public interest that may soon be superseded by changes in societal conditions, but the “old” description would remain in place. This gives people who may be the losers in a policy debate an incentive to resist compromise or agreement, for fear the result will be long lasting.

Protection of minorities from majority action is important. However, every day thousands of decisions are made by public bodies and officials (councils, boards, commissions, legislatures, professionals in public agencies) and it is impossible for each decision to accommodate the diversity of preferences that may be found in the public at large. The apparently irreconcilable differences between enacted law or policy and the interests of those who disagree with the majority view of the public interest can be softened by including the element of time. Instead of the substantive public interest as a fixed ideal that threatens diversity of preferences, it can be redescribed as the current majority view. It is cross-sectional, one point in a timeline of different, consecutive views of the public interest that appear in the public policy process and the laws, policies, and operating practices that result.

The current view of the public interest imposes the preference of the majority on the minority, for example in policy areas such as the size of the national military, affordable housing in a community, state funding for higher education, and so on. When the element of time is added, determination of the public interest takes on the appearance of a pluralist process of changing the content of the dominant view of the public interest to fit existing conditions. With the addition of the temporal element, the
several models of the public interest are no longer mutually exclusive but are instead different perspectives on the same phenomenon. As I have noted recently, in a temporal model

The public interest becomes a dialectical process in which the current image in use contains within it possibilities for its modification over time. It is known to be imperfect, alternatives are and will become available, and circumstances in the political, economic, or physical environment will change. When the current image outlives its usefulness, causing inefficiency, damage, public resistance, excessive cost, etc., a new dialogue will emerge and a new image will be adopted.

The redescription allows room to consider alternative futures outside the given circumstances of current institutional and legal constraints and extant distributions of power and wealth. In acknowledging the dialectical possibilities for change inherent in the present image of the public interest, a public interest incorporating time overcomes the intellectual stasis of the scholarly debate and adds to the usefulness of the concept in public affairs. (Box, 2007c, p. 596)

A temporal model of the public interest does not solve the problem of providing citizens with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions in an environment of elite influence on the content and flow of information. Also, it does not describe how public service academicians and practitioners might advocate for movement toward progressive values. It may, however, contribute to reinvigorating the concept of public interest, making it a practical counterbalance to a purely economic perspective on public action. The temporal model allows a substantive public interest to emerge that is the product of public discourse, administrative discretion, or change in societal conditions, offering a useful tool for deciding what should be done.

**Great Inequality/Limited Inequality**

Pairing great and limited inequality on the regressive/progressive continuum does not answer the questions of how much inequality is too much, how it is to be measured, or what should be done about it. It does, however, highlight inequality as a central problem for a just and progressive society. It is a perennial problem with no simple solutions, but it is tightly linked to movement toward progressive values and it is well worth the attention of public administration scholars and practitioners.
Social inequality is a complex issue and there is more to it than differences in economic status. Factors such as social class or background, race, gender, education, geographic location, and occupation are important. Here, though, we focus on income and wealth inequalities as a proxy, however imperfect, for social inequality. Many of the social problems dealt with by government, such as inadequate housing, poor nutrition, poor access to child care, low-quality education, lack of skills, little access to jobs, and absent or insufficient health care are to a large extent matters of insufficient resources allocated to problem solving.

Large social inequality is connected to formation of a permanent underclass and to occasional unrest and violence. It is often related to racial prejudice and intolerance. Periodically in America, there are destructive urban riots touched off by events such as use of excessive force by police. For a while following such unrest, some attention may be given to urban problems and maybe a bit of additional money will be funneled to affected areas, but in the end there appears to be no fundamental change. It may be that nothing can be done about this, that in American capitalist society there will be a significant percentage of the population who live on the margins. It may be that the best we can do is to offer some amelioration through social welfare programs, incremental improvement of schools, and so on. Comprehensive solutions such as investment in urban jobs, schools, training programs, day care, transportation, whatever it takes to solve the problem may today be outside the realm of political will. (Yet it is not beyond the nation’s capabilities, as the waste of resources in Iraq demonstrates.) This sort of solution had considerable success in the 1930s, but perhaps in contemporary neoliberal society one simply does not think comprehensively about inequality. How Americans have come to accept this reality of contemporary life as unchanging and morally acceptable is an interesting question.

The history of the United States can be told, in part, as a history of the distribution of wealth and power in society. Human societies are characterized by status distinctions, but expectations about these distinctions vary over time and between places. People in the “new world” centuries ago did not want society to be like monarchical Europe, and public displays of wealth were thought by many to be inappropriate. However, there was then, as there is today, an embedded belief in the freedom of the individual to make money and become wealthier than others. The belief that social inequalities should not be extreme or obvious, and the belief that people should be free to aspire to wealth and power, came
into conflict during the period that resulted in enactment of the U.S. Constitution. Many who opposed the new Constitution thought it was an attempt by the wealthy to preserve their property and position in society by suppressing the aspirations of ordinary people (Wood, 1969).

Belief in economic freedom became an acute part of the problem of social inequality in the later nineteenth century, with the full development of the Industrial Revolution. Though there were some large companies before this time, most people earned their living working independently as farmers or craftspeople and many produced goods at home or in small workshops. As this pattern changed, many people worked long hours in difficult conditions for someone else. People left their hometowns to move near their work and huge private companies grew to dominate large portions of the economy, often driving out competition and creating miserable working conditions and environmental damage (Zinn, 1980).

Government at all levels was inadequate to the task of curbing the excesses of business, as the preference for individual economic freedom clashed with the reality of an economy in which a relatively few wealthy people could significantly affect the lives of the general public. The Progressive Era (late nineteenth century to roughly 1920) is to a large extent a story of people organizing to protect themselves against the will of a few; gradually, the worst effects of industrialization and urbanization began to be countered by public sector action.

Despite gains made in the decades since the Progressive Era and the New Deal of the 1930s, in the United States today the top one percent of people make more money in total than the bottom forty percent and economic inequality has been growing since the late 1970s (Inequality.org, 2007). From 1979 to 2000, the ratio of income between the top five percent and the bottom twenty percent of families increased from 11:1 to 19:1 (Multinational Monitor, 2003). The problem of inequality extends beyond national borders, and “global income inequality is probably greater than it has ever been in human history” (UC Atlas of Global Inequality, 2004).

In comparison with a number of other developed nations, the “social safety net” in the United States is relatively weak. Despite this, for the past twenty-five years there has been a concerted effort to roll it back and to redistribute wealth from the bottom to the top of the socio-economic scale. Examples of policy initiatives related to this redistribution include changes in the federal income tax that favor the wealthy, failure to address the regressivity of the payroll tax that supports Social Security, attempts to
eliminate the estate tax, cutting back social services while pouring money into military adventures that benefit defense-related firms, attempts to weaken Social Security, gutting programs that assist urban areas, and so on. As a result of these initiatives and other trends in society, the gap between rich and poor continues to widen; business executives are paid gigantic salaries while workers have difficulty keeping up with inflation; many areas are denied adequate schools, employment opportunities, and health care; America is increasingly a bi-modal society in relation to wealth and meaningful access to public policy making; and a significant number of people are locked in poverty and settings of urban decay in a regressive sub-culture of violence, anti-intellectualism, misogyny, and dreams of success through miracles such as music or sports celebrity.

In Chapter 1, I described Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’s (1986) characterization of the relationship between the general public and the wealthy and powerful as a series of successive “accommodations”; that is, certain rights allowed the former by the latter to avoid a revolt of the masses. Bowles and Gintis note the potential incompatibility of personal rights and property rights; to put it another way, democracy and capitalism may occur together, but they are not the same thing and there is tension between them. It appears that contemporary America is in a rush to weaken the most recent accommodation, or social understanding, about the position of the many in relation to the few. The result, as Paul Krugman (2007) argues in *The Conscience of a Liberal*, is a return to the social inequality of earlier eras. The relatively equality of the 1950s, created in large part by the government programs and tax policies of the 1930s and 1940s, is giving way to “a second Gilded Age, as the middle-class society of the postwar era rapidly vanishes” (p. 39).

The empirical reality of social inequality is difficult to know, given the complexity of data and ideologically driven claims and interpretations. The grinding, degrading conditions that captured the imagination of the nation in the 1960s during Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty” do not today affect the percentage of the population they did at the time—public-sector social programs, despite their deficiencies, have had an impact. There seems to be no way to objectively assess what levels of inequality are “acceptable.” Inequality is greater in the United States than in many other countries, but so is affluence, and Americans tend to resist large-scale government intervention to reduce inequality. Indeed, they have repeatedly voted for leaders who promote income redistribution from the bottom to the top.
Ultimately, this is a matter of the sort of society in which we want to live. Relatively few people in the United States advocate measures that would radically restrict wealth accumulation or redistribute property and ownership to the masses. This means the field of action is limited to reducing gross inequalities that produce, as Richard Rorty would say, cruelty and suffering. In the context of regressive and progressive values, for public service academicians and practitioners the question is how to move policy and practice toward more progressive treatment of people and of human potential.

**Earth as Resource/Earth as Home**

From damage to global environmental systems to excessive and destructive development in local areas, this value pair involves grave and urgent threats to people and the planet. It links to the other four pairs of regressive and progressive values, because aggressiveness in pursuing economic gain and single-minded belief in the market as end have produced great inequality and environmental damage.

The regressive mind wants to extract resources from the natural world, to profit from them as quickly and efficiently as possible. The life span of one person is short and the natural world, millions of years old, seems to be permanent and unchangeable, so the individual has a built-in incentive to get as much as one can right now. Impacts on plants, animals, landscapes, and people of this and later generations who must live with the results are of little interest to the regressive mind. This mind concludes: If scientists say that 250 snowmobiles in Yellowstone are ecologically damaging in the short and long term, then by all means let’s increase it to 750. If the head climate scientist (a career professional) in NASA says that global warming will have devastating effects around the world, then why shouldn’t the agency head, a political appointee, say that no one knows whether the effects might be good or bad? If increased gasoline mileage standards for automobiles would reduce pollution and greenhouse gases, then let’s keep the standards lower than those in other developed nations. If destroying portions of a priceless Alaskan wilderness will yield some profit for a few oil companies, then let’s do it. Such things can be sold to the public by suppressing science and using misleading cover-story language, so that people come to believe that a minor increase in vehicular mileage standards instead of a large one will protect the environment, voluntary action on global warming will suffice, destruction of priceless
wilderness so that people can drive huge truck-like personal vehicles is a good thing, a “clear skies” initiative that will benefit polluters is good for the environment, killing off endangered species is a minor price to pay for “progress,” and so on.

The condition of the physical environment is one of the most visible and disturbing problems in the United States and in other countries. The quality of life, and ultimately life itself, depend on the environment, and the current situation is grave. There have been warnings in the United States for decades about deteriorating air and water quality, inadequate preservation of natural areas, poor planning and misuse of land, destruction of wildlife habitat, forests, agricultural land, and so on. Laws were passed in the 1960s and 1970s at the national level to address these issues and there have been initiatives at the state level and local levels as well. Despite these efforts, reversal of environmental fortunes began with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the record at the state and local levels has been mixed. Attention locally has shifted from controlling damaging market activities such as urban sprawl and esthetically offensive development, to promoting economic development, “public-private partnerships,” and public-sector “entrepreneurism.” Overall, it may be said that the impulse to protect and preserve the physical environment flowered in the 1960s and 1970s, met with stiff resistance from market forces beginning in the 1980s, and remains on the defensive today.

In recent years, the national government, working with developers, corporate executives, and landowners has worked to weaken or reverse environmental policies and laws created over the past four decades to protect land, air, water, and wildlife. Political initiatives intended to benefit a few at the expense of the broader public and future generations are so numerous and varied that it is difficult to track them. There are many environmental problems occurring in other countries that deserve attention, but the situation in the United States is significant because of the size of its economy, the effects of U.S. actions on other countries, and the wide-ranging character of current anti-environmental efforts. (It is problematic to show website addresses because they change frequently. However, as I write this I find thorough documentation of environmental conditions and governmental actions projected through Fiscal Year 2007 on a Wilderness Society website, http://www.wilderness.org/Library/Documents/BushRecord.cfm, and a website created by a group called “Cooperative Research,” http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/project.jsp?project=bush_enviro_record. They show evidence of
widespread, comprehensive, detailed efforts by the national government to disregard and dismantle the nation’s environmental protections for the benefit of corporations and businesspeople.)

Today’s environmental situation provides a clear demonstration of the effects of market thought on public sector policy and administration. Policies that damage the environment are carried out by career employees in agencies at all levels of government that deal with land, air, water, and wildlife management. Regressive market-driven practices, based on a view of the natural environment as a pool of extractable resources useful for short-term profit, show in stark contrast against progressive, conservation-oriented practices that view the natural environment as a permanent living space that needs to be protected.

During environmentally progressive interludes, government has been turned to the task of moderating some of the worst environmental abuses of the market. During other periods, however, government often assists the market in environmental destruction by failing to regulate regressive practices that devastate invaluable resources, landscapes, and ecosystems. At the national and global levels, issues such as air and water quality, clearing of forests, and global warming show the failure of public will to keep pace with the rate of environmental deterioration. At the local level, growth management and sustainability are often overwhelmed by the rush to compete for economic development.

Environmental degradation and protection is a huge area of study and practice, far beyond what can be dealt with here. However, I want to highlight two points that are especially relevant for public administration theory and practice. One is that many environmental issues have impact close to home and the other is that inspiration is important in social change.

Environmental quality often seems a matter of distant problems such as global warming or deforestation in the Amazon Basin, problems that seem beyond the reach and daily lives of most people. Many environmental issues, though, are both understandable and accessible to people who want to effect change. These include a range of urban matters, from the macro, such as air quality, to the micro, such as esthetic design standards for buildings and signs. It is not only wilderness or global climate that are at risk, it is the quality of the immediate environment and its relationship to health and the psychological esthetics of sight, sound, and everyday experience.

Motivations for policy and action in urban areas are multiple, in-
terwoven, and complex, but important themes can be identified. Not surprisingly, a primary theme is the effect of economic motivation, the desire to profit from the development and use of land. (I have written about this elsewhere, so will not give a full explanation here—see Box, 1998, chap. 2; 2005, chaps. 6, 7.) People in local communities do not control regional, state, or national policies or programs, but they do exert significant control over the use of land, so it is in this arena that much local politics plays out (Peterson, 1981). Often, the public issues agenda is shaped, if not controlled, by people, organizations, and coalitions interested directly or indirectly in profiting from growth. These include local business people, politicians, media, utilities, universities, museums and theaters, professional sports, and organized labor (Logan & Molotch 1987), and supporting professions and businesses such as attorneys, accountants, title companies, construction firms, and many others. Harvey Molotch (1976) captured the characteristics of these groupings with the label “growth machine.” John Logan and Harvey Molotch (1987, p. 12) describe the growth machine, and those who oppose it, as follows:

People dreaming, planning, and organizing themselves to make money from property are the agents through which accumulation does its work at the level of the urban place. Social groups that push against these manipulations embody human strivings for affection, community, and sheer physical survival. The boundaries of our urban sociology are drawn around the meeting place (geographical and analytical) of these two struggles.

Things are not quite as simple as this characterization, but it is a clear portrayal of the importance of economics for urban affairs. They are not this simple because many other factors can influence local politics, and because who is for and who is against the growth machine depends on the issue(s) at hand. Adapting Marx’s distinction between “exchange” value and “use” value, Logan and Molotch describe the interests of people who value the community as a place to make profits (place as exchange value), and those who value it as a place to live (place as use value). Things become more complex when people are confronted with policy choices. To use myself as an example, it will not surprise the reader to hear that I dislike uncontrolled, poorly planned growth, with its air pollution, traffic congestion, ugly development, destruction of surrounding open space, and so on. However, if asked to choose between a certain level of growth and declines in enrollment at my university that could
result in faculty layoffs and program cuts, I might not be as stridently opposed to the growth machine.

Choices are often not so straightforward, but this example illustrates the point that motivations and preferences can be complex. Despite this complexity, the important concept for our purposes is that materialist interest in profiting from the urban place affects many aspects of local governance. It is connected to core urban concerns such as land-use planning, funding and design of streets, sewer and water systems, parks, schools, museums and other public buildings, and regulation of private land, including building, sign, and landscape design and construction, provision of affordable housing, allowable land uses, and so on. Any and all of these and other functional areas of local governance can be and often are intensely controversial, political, and divisive. They relate to groupings of interests and cleavages between groups and people with different visions of the future of place, of who benefits, who pays, and who may be damaged. Typical regressive approaches to these matters minimize cost, distribute costs away from developers and toward citizens, use closed and exclusive decision-making processes, maximize commercial value, and consume, clutter, and cheapen the physical environment with ugly, traffic-oriented development. Progressive approaches take cost into account, but also emphasize fairness in allocating costs, quality of design, esthetic contribution, and open and inclusive decision-making processes.

Career public service practitioners are often deeply involved in these issues, providing technical information to elected and appointed leaders, citizens, and the media, and carrying out routine tasks of implementation. In this way, they can directly affect whether public action in the immediate physical environment is regressive or progressive.

It is natural for us to be accustomed to the way things are, to go through our daily routines without wondering whether there are alternatives that could improve our lives and those of others. It is in this context that inspiration becomes especially important for social change. We might be inspired by reading about practices in other places or hearing about them from colleagues, or by the actions of people in leadership roles. As an example of the former, I recall many years ago being asked by a planning director from Sweden who was touring in the United States why we were despoiling such a beautiful country with ugly, unplanned development. Outside perspectives can be enlightening.

There are times, perhaps coinciding with Schlesinger’s cycles of public
purpose, when leaders emerge who inspire people to actively explore new ways of thinking, to challenge existing power relationships, policies, and practices, and to advocate for change. It is difficult to know whether such leaders emerge because the times are right, whether they shape the times, or both; ultimately, this is irrelevant to the observation that such times and leaders open windows into new thought and action. Currently, many local government leaders have emerged to fill a portion of the gap in environmental protection created by the national government. Examples are the City of Seattle’s sustainability program and the U.S. Mayor’s Climate Protection Agreement, involving some 600 cities nationwide (see the website of the Seattle Office of Sustainability and Environment, http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/environment).

Let me share an example of a time and a leader that inspired me, both then and in later years. The time was the late 1960s through the mid-1970s and the place was Oregon. In Southern Oregon I worked as a planning intern, planner, and planning director during much of the time Tom McCall served as governor (he was governor from 1967 to 1975 and died in 1983). McCall is a legendary figure in Oregon and, though few people outside the state know of him, he influenced thinking about the environment nationwide in ways that persist today. He came from a ranching family on the east side of the Cascades, graduated from the University of Oregon in 1936, and later was a newspaper, radio, and television journalist in Portland. In 1954, he ran for a Congressional seat as a Republican and lost narrowly to Edith Green. (For a summary of Tom McCall’s life, see the Oregon Historical Society website, http://www.ohs.org/education/focus_on_oregon_history/GHO-Governor-McCall.cfm.)

McCall’s record of environmental activism began with the airing in 1962 of his television report *Pollution in Paradise* about the condition of the Willamette River, which runs through the Willamette Valley in northwestern Oregon and divides the City of Portland. The river was badly polluted with effluent from pulp mills and municipal sewage and politicians had dragged their feet for years on cleanup efforts. McCall’s report set the stage for actions he would take as governor. He was elected secretary of state in 1964 and governor in 1966. His two terms as governor were a whirlwind of activity in several areas, but his legacy is shaped significantly by achievements in environmental protection. They include a law controlling development on the Oregon coast, the nation’s first “bottle bill,” requiring deposits for return of beverage bottles, and the nation’s most comprehensive, far-reaching land-use planning
law, Senate Bill 100, passed in 1973. The planning system created by SB 100 came to include twelve state planning goals, since expanded to nineteen, on citizen involvement, land use, agricultural lands, forest lands, natural resources, scenic and historic areas, open spaces, air, water, and land resources quality, areas subject to natural hazards, recreational needs, economic development, housing, public facilities and services, transportation, energy conservation, urbanization, the Willamette River Greenway, estuarine resources, coastal shorelands, beaches and dunes, and ocean resources.

Every city and county in Oregon was required to adopt a comprehensive land-use plan in conformance with the state planning goals. The plans were evaluated for compliance by a state agency and commission (the Land Conservation and Development Commission, or LCDC) and subsequent plan modifications are subject to state approval as well. Many of the provisions of the state planning goals were revolutionary at the time and remain far ahead of planning practice in much of the United States. They include, for example, requirements for citizen participation in the planning process (McCall knew that local landowning and economic elites would stifle discussion of alternative futures, so he made sure the law required community involvement), urban growth boundaries around urban areas to limit urban sprawl, protection of forest and agricultural lands, and provision of affordable housing. The law has withstood several attempts at repeal and has been weakened somewhat in implementation by a measure requiring compensation to landowners for passage of regulations limiting use of their land, but it remains intact, a remarkable environmental achievement.

Tom McCall was a politician. It is not my intent to use him as an exemplar for the career public service, but to illustrate how inspiration can make a difference in opportunities for career public professionals to advance progressive treatment of the environment. In the unique time and place that was Oregon during the McCall era, there was an energy, a sense of possibility, that I have not experienced before or since. I was a college student and then a young planner in Oregon during much of that time. I took part in one of the regional workshops offered by state staff to gather citizen ideas on the content of the statewide planning goals, I was a charter member of 1000 Friends of Oregon, a watchdog group for the Oregon planning system, and I supervised the writing of three comprehensive plans under the statewide goals, including one of the two first plans to be granted compliance acknowledgement by LCDC.
During that window in time, it seemed possible for communities to move beyond control by a few, involving broad citizen representation in dialogue about alternative possibilities for the future. McCall’s staff distributed materials on topics such as energy conservation that were beyond cutting edge at the time and they might seem advanced today. McCall met stiff opposition, as did many of us implementing the state mandate at the local level, but his ideas shaped professional action, gave us what appeared to be a framework for creating a democratic society that included everyone who wanted to participate, and expanded our thinking about social change and the potential for an enlightened public life. That time, the things we accomplished, and the things we thought we could accomplish, have stayed with me as a source of inspiration for progressive thought and action. We all have the capacity to imagine communities, practices, and ways of governing that are different from the present, beyond the “given.” Many of us have stories to tell about sources of inspiration, imagination, and possibility—it happens that Tom McCall is such a story for me. The broader issue is how public service practitioners and academicians can translate inspiration into action in support of progressive values, and it is to that issue we turn in the next two chapters.

Note

So far nothing has been said in this discussion about the significance of public for public administration, which comes close to discussing Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

—Dwight Waldo
*The Enterprise of Public Administration*  
(1980, p. 78)

I am coming to Wichita to take absolute charge. . . . I will insist on an absolutely clean city. I am a member of the Presbyterian Church and believe in the highest moral standards. I will use every endeavor to establish that standard in the city as fully as possible. . . . I will not let politics enter the city affairs in any way.

—Louis Ash, 1917,  
on becoming Wichita’s first city manager  
(Flentje & Counihan, 1984, p. 10)

The contemporary emphasis on blurring sectoral boundaries and running government like a business makes it relatively easy for people to think there is little about the role of the career public sector professional that is unique. Possibly that makes sense when public policy implementation is viewed from the “outside” perspective of control and outcomes. Then, management appears to consist of coordination, techniques, and measurement, so the legal, structural, political, and economic factors that shape and bound it are put in the background. When such implementation is viewed from the “inside” perspective of the career public professional,
however, it becomes apparent that working in the public sector is quite different from working in the private and nonprofit sectors in a number of ways, including the institutional setting, public expectations, and freedom to act.

The daily work of the public professional is constrained by institutional structures large and small that have developed over time, and the work varies among people employed in different levels of government and occupational areas. Today’s highly complex division of public sector professional labor developed from relatively simple origins in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The national government grew from a beginning consisting of a small military, postal workers, customs officials, and a relatively small number of political appointees, clerks and assistants. Local government began with volunteers carrying out functions such as standing public safety watch, repairing roads, and taking care of the poor; gradually the demands of increasing population and urbanization made it necessary to pay people to do the work, leading to professionalization of local public services.

With increasing size and complexity comes creation of structures and mechanisms that define institutions and provide some stability for participants. Of primary importance are the documents that describe institutional structure and function: the Constitution at the national level, state constitutions, and at the local level state laws and home-rule charters. This is followed by laws and ordinances, and then by administrative regulations and operating procedures. It is close to impossible to describe in detail this rich, complex mixture of institutional structures across the tens of thousands of units of government and the many public sector occupational specializations. To say that someone works for government does not begin to capture the substantive variation in institutional settings. As an example, the institutional framework of the position of a NASA manager at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida is so different from that of a land-use planner in a small town in California that the commonalities can be expressed in only the broadest terms. However, both work within the constraints of institutions created to serve all the citizens in a defined geographic area, and they answer—the NASA manager quite indirectly and the land-use planner quite directly—to an elected body. There can be a considerable difference between what the majority of the public thinks about a particular issue and what an elected body will do about it, and this difference may be even greater if one takes into account what citizens might think if they were fully aware of their
situation. Nevertheless, given current structures of government, public professionals answer to elected governing bodies and often they are also aware of public sentiment on important policy issues.

This means that public expectations shape the roles of these two people and all other public sector professionals. In comparison with citizens of many other nations, Americans expect public employees to be particularly accountable to elected leaders and they expect them to carry out adopted policies as closely as possible. The reality of running complex public organizations can include significant slippage between what elected leaders want and what happens at the point of service delivery, and it can also mean that public professionals are not as subservient as public opinion would prefer. Nevertheless, part of the operating environment of the public professional is the public expectation of faithful adherence to political will. (In public administration scholarship, classic expressions of concern about the role of the public professional in a democratic society can be found in, for example, Theodore Lowi’s *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* [1969]; and Victor Thompson’s *Without Sympathy or Enthusiasm: The Problem of Administrative Compassion* [1975].)

In neither the private nor the nonprofit sectors do career people work within such a complicated and confining institutional framework. They are not expected to serve the interests of everyone in their service area, they can choose their services and clientele, and in many cases the character of oversight by governing bodies such as a board of directors is less demanding and detailed than it can be in the public sector, especially in local government. These structural and institutional differences between public sector work and work in the private and nonprofit sectors make for a unique action environment for public professionals who want to use progressive values to shape social change.

This brings us to the question of freedom to act in the public sector, or, in the language of public administration scholarship, administrative discretion. It also suggests that it will be useful to consider the problem of leadership by career public administrators—not leadership of employees within an organization, but leadership in shaping organizational goals and relationships with the external environment. In a political/cultural environment that expects public professionals to execute the will of elected leaders, it is not easy for the public professional to do this, but it is often essential to success. The next section explores administrative discretion and leadership, not so much as topics of interest in themselves, but as
a prelude to discussion that follows of options available to the public professional who wants to create progressive change.

**The Public Professional as Agent of Change**

To discover and describe progressive actions that may be taken in the public sector, it will be useful to outline scholarly and public views about the idea that public professionals may function as agents of social change. As the reader might imagine, below I paint a picture of difficulty and challenge, because this idea does not fit easily with the institutional structures of the public sector or with public expectations for bureaucratic accountability.

Scholars have debated the roles of public professionals in American society since the late nineteenth century. In response to the excesses of spoils and patronage, they sought ways to distinguish, to protect, administration from partisan politics. With the increasing complexity of government in the twentieth century the idea of a clear-cut separation of politics and administration, a dichotomy between the two spheres of action, evaporated. Recognizing that the work of elected officials and career public practitioners is interrelated did not resolve the issues that accompany pairing people elected to make public decisions with people they hire to implement them. As Dwight Waldo put it, “No problem is more central to public administration, the existential, real-world enterprise, and to Public Administration, the self-aware enterprise of study and education, than the relationship of politics and administration” (1980, p. 65).

The public administration literature is rich with models of the role of the public service practitioner. These models can be descriptive when they are informed by knowledge of existing conditions and they can be normative when they express preferences for the future. Since Woodrow Wilson’s argument in 1887 for a distinct administrative role, many authors have written about the relationship between policy making and implementation. Though the literature of public administration may appear to say that the politics-administration “dichotomy” was central to the field until World War II, after which it was discarded, the reality is that practitioners early and late have recognized the fuzziness of the boundary between the two areas and at the same time its importance in their daily work. Note, for example, the epigram to this chapter from Louis Ash. Ash asserted a clear separation of politics and administration, but not
by recognizing the sphere of politics (discourse and decision making on matters of public interest) and finding a balance between administration and implementation. Instead, he wanted to exclude people outside the administrative hierarchy from any influence over administration, plus he was ready to use his personal religious beliefs to shape his professional work. This quotation from 1917 gives us reason to think that practitioners have always known there is no dichotomy of politics and administration, but it took academicians a few decades to catch up with practice. Given that most elected leaders are not experts in governmental administration and unelected professionals manage the work of government, a role tension is present that offers fertile ground for scholarly study.

Among theoretical approaches to the roles of public professionals in the post–World War II public administration literature, we can highlight seven that are especially relevant to the idea of practitioners as agents of social change who use progressive values in their work. First, the New Public Administration of the 1960s and 1970s advocated social equity as an important companion, or supplement, to the dominant value of efficiency (Frederickson, 1980). It arose in response to perceived social imbalances such as racial discrimination and widespread poverty. It was a time when government appeared to be mobilizing to address these problems; a hopeful, constructive, and progressive view of the role of public administrators seemed realistic and achievable. New Public Administration encountered resistance from those who considered it “a brazen attempt to ‘steal’ the popular sovereignty” (Thompson, 1975, p. 66) and it ran counter to the public expectation of a subservient and accountable bureaucracy. Though New Public Administration did not generate large-scale change in the field, it should be credited at a minimum with making the issue of social equity more visible, and today that issue seems to be returning as a focus of interest (Svara & Brunet, 2005).

Second, with the shift in national politics in the 1980s, the political environment of public administration grew increasingly hostile, making it more difficult to envision public professionals as agents of change. In an era of declining resources and “bureaucrat bashing,” a number of scholars suggested ways to allow public professionals “legitimacy” in acting relatively independently to address public problems. The Blacksburg Manifesto (Wamsley, Goodsell, Rohr, Stivers, White, & Wolf, 1987) and related articles and books argued in the 1980s and 1990s for an enhanced status for public administration in the constitutional order. This perspective encountered difficulties due to the historical and
cultural resistance in American society to a more formal, authoritative state, and its constitutional orientation is less relevant for the larger body of public employees in state and particularly local government than it is for national-level practitioners. Nevertheless, it illustrates the concern for greater administrative latitude to function as a policy actor as well as implementer. There were other arguments made during this period for greater legitimacy for the public service, for example Michael Harmon’s “action theory” (1981) and Michael Spicer and Larry Terry’s “logic of a constitution” (1993). The concept of legitimacy serves today as a valued contribution to understanding the role of the public service practitioner in a democratic society. Its limitations in effecting change on the ground assist us in realistically assessing the potential for public professionals to act as agents of progressive change.

Third, the idea of public professionals leading their agencies in setting an agenda and carrying it out is enough to upset anyone who shares Thompson’s concern about theft of the popular sovereignty. Leadership books and articles in public administration are mostly about how to motivate employees, standard business-school concepts transplanted into study of the public sector, or they are about political appointees or elected politicians rather than career professionals. A few authors have taken on the challenge of defining a leadership role for professional public administrators. An example is Larry Terry’s “administrative conservatorship,” found in Leadership of Public Bureaucracies: The Administrator as Conservator (1995). It is a model crafted as a way to legitimize leadership by public professionals though it is regarded as “somehow antidemocratic—a fundamental violation of the principle of accountability” (Morgan, 1995, p. ix). Terry’s concept of leadership, as indicated by his subtitle, is indeed conservative, even defensive. It is based on preserving public bureaucracies “so that they can serve the public good. Thus, the primary function of bureaucratic leaders is to protect and maintain administrative institutions in a manner that promotes or is consistent with constitutional processes, values, and beliefs” (Terry, 1995, p. 24) This is an important and worthwhile goal, but it may not be helpful in conceptualizing how to integrate progressive values into administrative work. Leadership in applying progressive values probably requires moving beyond institutional conservatorship, sometimes encouraging change in adopted policies and agency mission to accomplish new and different goals.

Fourth, beginning in the 1950s, economic thought has been applied in several forms in the public sector (Box, 1999), including description
of the roles of public professionals such as William Niskanen’s (1971) budget maximizer, the monitored incentive-led bureaucrat of principal-agent theory, and the efficient entrepreneur of new public management. Some models based on economic thought have been modified over time as their relatively simplistic deductive assumptions about the public sector have been softened to accommodate the empirical realities of practice (Waterman & Meier, 1998). Nevertheless, they retain significant power to influence the thinking of politicians, practitioners, and academicians. In part this may be due to the neoliberal appetite for reducing the complex goals and purposes of government to pursuit of economic efficiency. In part it may be due to the seductive appeal of “objective” explanations in which “Truth” is always just around the corner. In general, economic thought harnesses the work of agents, in this case public professionals, to the expressed will of principals, who can be superiors in the bureaucracy, political appointees, elected leaders, or citizens. This allows little leeway for introducing progressive values that would challenge current thinking and practice, though as noted the premises of economic thought in the public sector are broadening, for example in recognizing situations where information asymmetry or goal conflict allow agents latitude to act.

Fifth, it is common in public administration to place the question of freedom to act within a legal-constitutional framework. In this view, the primary duty of the public professional is to be aware of limitations and duties imposed by the Constitution (Lowi, 1993) (and by extension, one would assume, state constitutions and local charters), decisions of the Supreme Court (Rohr, 1978), and broadly, the rule of law (Rosenbloom, 2005). It may seem that this approach to administrative discretion is especially limiting, but it need not mean that the public professional cannot move unless explicitly directed by law, policy, or valid order. There is room within the legal-constitutional order for public professionals to apply their expertise and creativity, but this view would ensure that it takes place without violating the structures of representative democracy and the legal-constitutional system. Defining a violation of those structures is often not a simple task, in a setting that includes multiple sources of accountability (does a practitioner answer to a bureaucratic superior, to elected officials or political appointees, to the wishes of groups in the surrounding society, to court decisions, to a view of the public interest, to professional norms of practice, to all of the preceding and more?), conflicting goals, and the potential for subversion of organizational authority (O’Leary, 2006). There are situations in which public professionals
choose to disobey or subvert authority, for example by organizing public
or organizational support for their preferences against those of elected
superiors. However, here we focus on change efforts that are open and
aboveboard, so that while they may seek to change existing policy and
practice, they do so in keeping with lawful authority.

Sixth, people writing from the perspectives of postmodernism (Farmer,
1995), pragmatism (McSwite, 1997), and discourse (Fox & Miller, 1995;
McSwite, 1997) have challenged traditional views of the administrative
role, questioning fundamental assumptions and suggesting that foun-
dational, unitary, rational, bureaucratic models may not be appropriate.
These writers emphasize public deliberation, process more than sub-
stance, and an open, inclusive attitude toward the many perspectives and
preferences held by participants in public dialogue. To the extent this work
describes public professionals, they are likely to serve as facilitators of
public discourse or as policy implementers who take care not to coerce
or damage those they serve. They may be less likely to take proactive,
progressive action due to caution about goals and purposes in the form of
“metanarrative,” or because the primary legitimacy in the public sphere
is reserved for discourse processes and citizen cooperation rather than
public employees.

Seventh, a few authors in public administration have portrayed public
professionals as agents of social change, using the framework of critical
social theory. Examples are found in the recent books Transformational
Public Service: Portraits of Theory in Practice (2005) by Cheryl Simrell
King and Lisa Zanetti, and my Critical Social Theory in Public Admin-
istration (Box, 2005). These authors use critical analysis of existing
political and economic systems to present descriptions of, and prescrip-
tions for, the public professional’s role in constructive social change.
King and Zanetti interweave stories of the work of practitioners who are
committed to social and organizational change with critical theories of
transformation. I use critical theory to build a model of practice involving
professional use of reason and imagination in the service of construc-
tive social change. The critical social theory perspective is forthright in
suggesting that practitioners can, and should, envision and initiate social
change. It is marginal in public administration because it challenges the
given social order, possibly threatening entrenched interests of power
and wealth, so practitioners may hesitate to adopt what appears to be an
alien and socially suspect approach to the public service role.

These seven approaches to the roles of public professionals show that
much time and effort have been spent exploring the latitude for action, the sphere of administrative discretion, available to influence the content and implementation of public policy. Put another way, this work probes the extent to which people in the societal environment of public agencies will tolerate initiatives from practitioners that could alter the status quo. If we like to think of people in public service as relatively free to explore new ideas, the picture that emerges from this review of seven approaches could seem bleak, with practitioners hemmed in by legal structures and public expectations, reduced to bureaucratic functionaries with little freedom to act. But, if we begin by thinking of the public service as an extension of political will so that any administrative discretion is welcome, then the complexities of society and administration allow a variety of openings, opportunities for public professionals to influence policy and practice within the existing legal and political order.

Another way to think about administrative discretion is through the substantial literature describing the observed behavior of public professionals by labeling the roles they play. Here are two examples. Barry Hammond and Bayard Catron (1990) offer a summary of thought on the role of the public service practitioner, in the form of seven “images.” Hammond and Catron (p. 242) are careful to note that these images are not mutually exclusive and an individual practitioner may make use of parts of one or more of them at various times. The seven images are: functionary (the traditional neutrality role); opportunist/pragmatist (administrator as utility maximizer); interest broker/market manager (the public choice administrator); professional expert/technician (the autonomous technicist); agent/trustee (guardian or steward of the public interest); communitarian facilitator (enabling face-to-face discourse); and transformational social critic (protecting citizens from conditions in society). This typology offers a rich collection of possibilities, arranged along a continuum. At one end is a bureaucratic functionary and at the other a transformational social critic that closely parallels recent work in critical social theory. It also includes an interest broker derived from the economic approach, a guardian of the public interest who sounds much like Terry’s conservator, and a communitarian facilitator much like the facilitative administrator in discourse theory.

Based on interviews and a survey instrument used to sample city managers and city council members, William Fannin (1983) constructed a typology of managers in Texas. Fannin’s five role types are the “administrative craftsman,” the “administrative technician,” the “expert
advisor,” the “political activist,” and the “policy non-actor.” He found that city managers and council members both preferred the “expert advisor” role, though Fannin’s expert is not Hammond and Catron’s autonomous technicist, but instead a person who engages with the local community and formulates policy for consideration by elected officials. Again, roles are arranged along a continuum with at one end a relatively neutral functionary and at the other a policy activist.

There are quite a number of these continuum-typologies in the public administration literature. In the book *Citizen Governance* (1998), I offered a typology of “implementer,” “helper,” and “controller” roles. These role types are arranged along the familiar continuum of administrative discretion, with the implementer standing in for the neutral functionary and the controller taking the polar position of professionals who seek to shape outcomes by excluding politics from administration or actively influencing the policy process. In the middle is the helper, a role in which public professionals give citizens the information and access to the policy process they need to self-govern. The helper role is shaped by critical social theory, so that information and access are prerequisite to identifying alternative futures and challenging the status quo.

It is appealing to think of practitioners as street-level functionaries close to the general public, and this characterization is accurate for many. However, for some practitioners being close to the public is not the same thing as sharing their interests; police officers in areas of racial unrest and resistance to authority are an example. For others who work in offices and manage services the public may be largely an abstraction, a rather distant one as they perform complex administrative tasks, go to meetings with other professionals, and in midday have lunch with colleagues or community leaders.

Often, it is the wealthy and powerful who determine the public policy agenda, the outcomes of the decision-making process, and how public services are delivered. This reality suggests that practitioners and academicians who care about progressive change need to exercise imagination and courage in service to their sense of mission. The “change agent” end of the continuum of administrative discretion often draws criticism from those who believe in clear subordination of public administration in a constitutional, representative democracy. Societal constraints on change can be formidable and the idea that public service practitioners might function as agents of change is problematic in American society. Career public professionals are not elected and it is assumed by many
that they should serve as agents of the status quo and established policy and practice.

It is unrealistic much of the time to expect a portion of the public to rise up to demand social change. It is even difficult to get people to vote, that minimal act of citizenship in which people take a few minutes to express often-uninformed opinions about candidates who may or may not have the capacity to effect meaningful change. In today’s setting of consumerist distractions, corporate-owned media, and multiplying and diverse interests and communities of association, for public practitioners to gather, inform, and carry on dialogue with something resembling a representative public may seem a fantasy of the past (though in a number of places nationwide active citizen self-governance and neighborhood initiatives are doing well; see, for example, Musso, 1999). Citizen organizing through the Internet may be a useful counter to the problem of finding a public, but it may also be difficult to apply to the dialogue process associated with public deliberation, which involves practitioners sharing information with citizens and joining conversations on multiple perspectives and alternative possibilities, leading to a recommendation or decision.

In *Organizational America* (1979), William G. Scott and David K. Hart observe that the “significant” people and the “insignificant” people in society are not likely to challenge the “organizational imperative” of hierarchical corporate domination. The significant people have too much to lose and the insignificant people are dependent on the significant people for employment and consumer goods. Scott and Hart argue that there is public support for change and that if any group of organization-bound citizens could prevent the nation from “drifting into totalitarianism” (p. 215), it would be the “professional people” who “have the technical and organizational expertise to galvanize this support into a reform movement” (p. 220). In the public sector, this may be laying too much at the doorstep of unelected professionals, but it calls attention to the overall problem of initiating change and suggests openings and possibilities.

Beyond the problem of societal acceptance of public service practitioners as agents of change, the proportion of practitioners who are in circumstances to act in this role is probably relatively limited and, of those, only some are so inclined. People in positions with certain characteristics may have the best opportunities to function as change agents. These positions include “boundary-spanning” jobs whose occupants work directly with the public, management-level and staff jobs in which there
is direct access to decision makers, and technical positions that offer opportunities to shape decisions by providing information. The people involved are those public professionals, in whatever positions, who believe that progressive change is desirable and important.

Creating Change in Policy and Practice

We have found that the public sector work setting is significantly different from that of the private and nonprofit sectors, involving public expectations and legal and structural constraints unique to the public sphere. The history of the relationship of public service practitioners to a liberal-capitalist democracy is rich, complicated, and often involves conflicting or ambiguous features that make it difficult to sort out both current practice and preferences for the future. There are many things that can motivate practitioners to work for progressive change, including life experiences, conditions in society, a sense of professional norms and standards, empathy with the public, and so on (Box, 1998, chap. 5; Van Wart, 1998; also, see the “internal controls” described by Cooper, 2006, chap. 6).

There are places and times when progressive change is part of the political milieu, much as it was during the governorship of Tom McCall described in Chapter 2. In these places and times, either the regressive political-economic forces of the status quo have been overcome for the time being by public awareness and demand for change, or, contrary to the more common regressive orientation, the political-economic leadership in society prefers progressive change. The McCall era is an example of the first sort, which we might label situational. There was a flowering of public acceptance for progressive ideas, then for some years after McCall left office there was a backlash against his orientation.

There are places and times in which progressive values are supported by a significant portion of the political-economic elite and the general public alike—we might label this a structural orientation toward progressive values. In such places, people are interested in cooperation, tolerance, equity, knowledge, and environmental awareness and they try to shape public sector policies and programs accordingly. This is not to say that everyone will agree, that everyone is treated fairly, or that all outcomes are desirable from the perspective of progressive values. It is only to note that neighborhoods, towns, and sometimes states can be found that seem to exhibit these characteristics. That this is not a common phenomenon is
not surprising in liberal-democratic-capitalist society, especially during a
time when regressive values seem particularly in evidence. When it does
occur, there may be a variety of contributing factors relating to leadership,
economics, demographics, external conditions, and so on.

Sometimes, commitment to some progressive values but not others can
have negative effects. These effects may appear in communities where
support for progressive values mostly benefits political-economic elites,
for example by enhancing the livability of their residential environment
or the commercial value of their business property. An example of the
former are suburbs that use large-lot zoning to preserve a pleasant living
environment, which can have the effect of excluding minorities and others
of lower socio-economic status. An example of the latter are cities with
high-end businesses, beautiful streetscapes, and cultural attractions that
appeal to tourists and cater to wealthy residents, which can have the ef-
effect of driving up the cost of housing to the point that only high-income
people can afford to move there. (Many resort towns and university
towns are like this.)

This description of the relationship of progressive change and the
organizational milieu suggests how complex it can be to move attitudes
and practices toward progressive values. The sections below outline
three categories of action public professionals might use as they work
to contribute to progressive social change. These actions may be found
in different forms throughout the public administration literature and
they can be useful regardless of what purposes or values are served; it
happens that progressive values are the focus here.

**Gather Information and Present It to Others**

The title of this category of action sounds a bit pedestrian, boring—gather
information and present it to others. I want to suggest instead that it is
essential to the professional role, that it can offer a strong challenge to
entrenched interests and the status quo, and that it is a key part of advanc-
ing progressive values. Gathering information involves deciding what it
is important for agency professionals, organizational superiors, elected
officials, and citizens to know about conditions and trends in the agency
environment, and about alternative policies and practices found in other
organizations that may help in imagining a changed future. There prob-
ably are situations in which gathering information is a relatively objec-
tive process largely free of value judgments, but even those situations
can be weighted with important policy consequences. As an example, studying the condition of city streets and the effectiveness of municipal street maintenance efforts might often be straightforward, but not always. In situations in which street maintenance needs improvement, it is not unusual to find a spirited discussion developing about whether city personnel could operate more efficiently, whether more services should be contracted out, whether certain areas of town are favored over others, or whether money should be taken from other programs (such as parks or libraries) or taxes raised to improve street conditions.

We can imagine how value-laden and controversial the act of gathering information can be in many other programmatic areas, for example studying the type, location, severity, and frequency of crimes in a metropolitan area and the effectiveness of various programmatic responses by law enforcement, the courts, and social welfare agencies. Another example would be examining the effectiveness of programs that inspect for the safety of food, drugs, toys, nursing homes, highway bridges, coal mines, and so on. All we need do is recall recent incidents of injury, death, and disaster associated with these programmatic areas to understand the implications of gathering information on government’s role in protecting the public. Environmental examples include studying the impact of development on an endangered species or wetlands; the effects on erosion, wildlife habitat, and forest regeneration of federal policies allowing logging companies to construct access roads; the deteriorating conditions of national parks because of underfunding; or the effectiveness of local or state planning policies on reducing damage to agricultural and forest lands. Especially sensitive, high-profile examples of gathering information could include national intelligence estimates of the effectiveness of military and diplomatic activities overseas, or studies of the effects of taxation or health-care policies on the working poor and the middle class.

These are all useful examples of the potential for information gathering to have important policy implications. It is apparent that gathering information can lead to serious discussion about issues such as relationships between people of differing socio-economic status, the relationship of the public and the private and nonprofit sectors, the role of government in regulating private and corporate behaviors, and the influence of elites over the policy process and administrative implementation. These conceptual connections link to a critical social theory perspective on societal conditions, Rorty’s characterization of human behavior and the need to
reduce cruelty, and progressive values such as cooperation, economics as means, limited inequality, and Earth as home.

Sometimes public professionals are directed to gather specific information, sometimes they have considerable discretion in determining what to gather within the parameters of a broad request, and sometimes they initiate research based on their own assessment of need. Especially when there is latitude in gathering information and deciding how it will be used, the progressive value of knowledge is important and reliance on pre-determined belief seems inconsistent with the role of the public professional. Also, acting as if knowledge gathering is entirely a value-free exercise of the “rational protocol” (Hoch, 1994), an application of scientific objectivity, may not lend public credibility to an information-gathering exercise. It may be more useful to acknowledge that while rationality (grounding research in existing conditions rather than belief or preference) and the search for accurate depiction of reality are important elements of the research process, how an issue is defined and studied is a matter of judgment, a matter best approached with open discussion of choices and inherent limitations. Depiction of “reality” is often more about telling a story about perceptions than it is about communicating an intersubjective certainty that would appear the same to everyone.

An important part of many projects that involve gathering information is learning about policies and practices in other places or organizations. A survey of “best practices” can be especially effective in showing people accustomed to doing things in a particular way that others have found interesting approaches that may be more useful. It can be powerful in challenging the control over public knowledge of policies and practices exerted by people with something to gain from the status quo, and it can provide the knowledge base for exploring alternative futures, scenarios which show a range of potential results in the medium and long term.

Presenting information to people outside the organization is one of the most important things a practitioner can do to advance progressive values. This may involve delivering the results of research and analysis to a board or committee, serving as staff to such a group over time, or organizing a committee or association (for example, citizens in a neighborhood). I would rather not present here a literature review of types and techniques of citizen involvement; much has been published in this area and the material is readily accessible (for a brief history of approaches to citizen involvement, see Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006). In summary, making information available to the public to build understanding and
stimulate informed policy dialogue is important—it can help to improve inclusion of minority views, the legitimacy of public governance and policy, and often the quality of decision making. There are many situations in which involving people outside the organization is not useful, such as when the matter at hand is a technical aspect of implementation with little connection to broader policy issues or when speedy action is needed. However, when significant choices about the future are at stake, an ethical commitment by public professionals to make information broadly available is important to a democratic society.

Acquisition of knowledge and making it available outside the organization can present risks for the public professional (Box, 1998, chap. 5), but providing citizens with as much information as possible about current conditions, best practices, and alternative futures can be a significant part of enacting progressive values. To the extent citizens choose to become informed about, and involved in, the policy process, they need a full range of information and interpretation. The practitioner guided by a critical theoretic view will see this action option as a way to “enlighten” the public, potentially giving people the knowledge needed to initiate progressive social change.

**Change How Policy Is Implemented**

It is possible to largely suppress creativity, imagination, and empathy in public employees by assigning mind-numbing work or threatening negative consequences for deviation from official policy and practice. Nevertheless, every practitioner thinks about the world from her or his unique perspective and, within the constraints of the legal and institutional order, there is often room for independent judgment. Contrary to Lowi’s (1969) “juridical democracy,” it is not feasible to specify with precision what all public employees do, nor, in principal-agent terms, is it efficient to monitor them to the point that any “deviation” can be prevented.

The work of practitioners is shaped by the role expectations of their positions, but they apply personal and professional experience, beliefs, and standards of performance as they intentionally or unintentionally influence policy and the environment in which it is created and changed over time. They establish and modify operating procedures, shift staff and material resources among areas, and communicate their values and concerns to agency staff. In these and other ways, they change how policies and programs are implemented, potentially changing how citi-
zens, elected officials, and bureaucratic superiors think about societal conditions and what government should be doing. This dynamic and interactive process involving practices, perceptions, and policies opens the possibility of introducing progressive values into daily practice. One may argue it is inappropriate for unelected public employees to interject their preferences into public policy implementation in this way, but that argument is much like the one suggesting that teenage pregnancy can be prevented through abstinence alone—it denies the obvious reality in futile service to an ideological predisposition.

The issue of social equity in public administration, which was central to New Public Administration in the 1960s and 1970s, has been appearing again in the public administration literature. Because it is closely allied with the regressive/progressive value pair of great inequality and limited inequality, it offers a useful illustration of changing how policy is implemented. An exchange in *Journal of Public Affairs Education* in 2005 captures the problem of the role of the public professional in relation to social equity. James Svara and James Brunet (2005, p. 257) write that “services and benefits should be distributed equally or in such a way that those who are less advantaged receive greater benefits.” In response, David Rosenbloom is concerned that pursuit of social equity could lead practitioners to take actions that are not legitimate in the Constitutional order. Citing Victor Thompson’s (1975) warning against “stealing” popular sovereignty, Rosenbloom (2005, pp. 250–251) notes that “public administrators need a mandate from the constitutional branches of government to legitimate their pursuit of redistribution and social change. . . .” Thus, “advocacy, not imposition of personal and professional values, should be the rule” (p. 251).

Rosenbloom’s position defines acceptable behavior as I have done in this book, considering only actions that fit within the existing legal-institutional order. I disagree with the foundational language used by Svara and Brunet, who go beyond arguing for social equity as a desirable end, claiming that services and benefits “should be” distributed in a way that enhances equity. Regardless of how much I think that is a good idea in many cases (and I do, following my liking for Rorty’s normative wish to reduce cruelty and Marcuse’s analysis of the effects of one-dimensional society), I cannot imagine any foundational reason it “should be” the way things are.

The differences in the positions of Svara and Brunet and Rosenbloom can be turned to good use in at least two ways. One is to explore further
the matter of advocacy, which I do in the sub-section below. The other
is to acknowledge the space that exists between perfectly and repeatedly
replicating current practices so as to avoid deviation and striking out in
new directions in a way that would violate the intent of existing policy
and accepted practice. It is in acknowledging this space that I agree in part
with Svara and Brunet, and with other writers who identify the potential
for administrative discretion in complex governmental systems. There are
many things public professionals may do in their daily work that advance
preferred values or ends without putting them at cross-purposes with the
expressed will of legislative bodies or other sources of public legitimacy
(judicial decisions, citizen initiatives, etc.).

We can use an example related to social equity from the field of social
welfare to illustrate this concept. Imagine a newly appointed branch man-
ger within a state social welfare system. The branch is in a part of the
state far away from major population centers and has been run for decades
in a quite traditional way, with the staff divided into functional assistance
areas such as housing, food, medical care, work training, disability, and
so on. There have been attempts at centralizing intake processes across
functional areas, but they have had limited success in streamlining the
overall experience for clients. Staff are oriented toward the requirements
in law and policy of their particular areas of specialization and that is what
they do best. The result is that clients often spend many hours, even days,
working their way through the various parts of the system that apply to
them. To the extent efficiencies exist in cross-communication, they tend to
be specific to a particular client’s situation and the result of a staff person
“doing a favor” for a client.

The new branch manager dislikes treating clients as if their time has
no value, putting them through lots of red tape just because that is how
it has always been done. On a broader level, she wants to change how
people in this rural community think about and deal with the issue of
social inequality. Working with staff, she designed and is implementing
a new organizational structure focused on the client as a whole person
rather than on the bureaucracy. Now, when someone comes to the agency
for services, he or she is greeted by a staff person trained to assess the
ways the organization might improve his or her life and chances for work-
ing upward out of the social welfare system. That staff person remains
the client’s primary contact, taking responsibility for coordinating with
staff in functional areas to deliver services. The time spent by clients
interacting with the agency has been cut dramatically, the fit between
clients and services has improved, and overall staff time spent in client interaction has decreased significantly.

In addition to these internal improvements, the new branch manager reached out into the community to make the agency’s new approach visible to potential clients and community leaders. This was accomplished by having staff distribute flyers in shelters, restaurants, and churches, and having the manager speak to meetings of community business, civic, and religious groups.

As a result, the agency is serving more clients, and poverty, homelessness, and inequality have become part of the civic dialogue in a way they were not before, resulting in some new initiatives in the nonprofit sector to address these problems.

The branch manager’s ideas are not new. They have been used in other places, but in this remote area they were somewhat startling. Residents were not accustomed to speaking openly of the effects of social inequality, nor did they expect a state bureaucrat to lead in creating a community dialogue to address the issue. By bringing to her work professional concepts unfamiliar in this work setting and initiating change within the existing framework of policy and practice, the manager was able to create meaningful change that advanced progressive values. Aside from keeping her superior in the state capital aware of the changes being made in branch operations, she did not need to seek policy changes or approval of her plans. Instead, she worked comfortably within the space between doing what had always been done and violating existing policy or accepted practice; put another way, she advanced progressive values while remaining within the sphere of administrative discretion expected for the role of branch manager.

**Advocate for Programs and Policies**

This category of practitioner action is consistent with Rosenbloom’s “advocacy.” It builds on gathering information and presenting it to others, using it to bridge the gap between professional knowledge and the relevant governing body or bodies. It is part of an action loop that can include some or all of these elements: aggregation of interests that rise to the level of the public policy agenda; a period of public discourse; a decision that adopts a policy; implementation; and feedback on progress potentially leading to policy modification.

The public professional formulates a recommendation for change
to be presented, possibly with intermediate steps in the hierarchy, and possibly with public dialogue, to the ultimate decision maker(s). This could be a cabinet secretary at the national or state levels, Congress or a state legislature, or at the local level the city manager, mayor, or council. Making a recommendation that includes, explicitly or implicitly, a shift from the status quo toward progressive values can be risky because it involves movement of resources, power, or both, which may be resisted by those who benefit from the current situation. The person who would make the recommendation considers the risk and the potential benefits of change, deciding whether the benefits outweigh possible negative consequences.

Public involvement was discussed above in relation to presenting information to others and it can also be important in advocating for programs and policies. It becomes increasingly difficult for many people to take part in the traditional public policy process, for a variety of reasons including lack of knowledge about government, the cost of time needed to acquire information and participate, and changes in lifestyle and personal interests (Bennett, 1998). The national government was not created to promote participation by individual citizens and those who participate often do so through membership in large advocacy organizations. Individual participation at the state level is not much easier. At the local level there can be greater potential for involvement due to proximity and access, though access may be limited by governance practices that emphasize decision making by elites (Box, 1998). In any event, in most times and places only a small percentage of citizens participate in governance.

It is not necessarily widely accepted among practitioners that involving citizens is either important or efficient. Some consider it neither, but instead an intrusion on administrative discretion, a misuse of time (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004), or a violation of the authority of elected officials. Elected officials may regard citizen involvement as a threat to their authority, a way that unelected administrators can influence the constituents who support elected officials with their votes. They may also consider it a potential threat to their financial or other interests, or to the interests of powerful people whom they represent. These attitudes can make things difficult for a public professional who wants to recommend public involvement as one means of advocating for a new policy or practice.

In addition to these concerns about public participation in governance, there is the normative question of whether individual citizens should participate. To answer affirmatively is to adopt the Athenian/communitarian/
classical republican model of citizenship as a primary human goal. This model often underlies discussion in the public administration literature of citizen involvement in governance. As noted directly above, in contemporary urban society we cannot assume that most people either will or would want to participate in public decision making, but in addition it seems somewhat presumptuous to assume normatively that they should. Why, exactly, ought this concept be considered universal, invariant over time and place?

An opposing argument can be made from the classical liberal perspective that government should function primarily to protect the individual from harm by others, so it would focus on public safety as well as external defense, providing few additional services. This limited role for the public sector would minimize the potential for public sector action to harm individuals, but it suffers from a poor fit with contemporary society. It was conceived before the rise of urban society and corporations, so its emphasis on “negative liberty” (protecting the individual from the state and from other individuals) is not especially helpful when the individual faces global corporate society, people need public services to deal with collective problems, and government itself is often influenced or controlled by the interests from whom individuals need protection.

Part of advocating for progressive values may involve recognizing that not everyone has open and easy access to the policy process and, even with the time, knowledge, and resources to participate, not everyone would choose to do so. This does not mean that people with little access because of circumstances or people who choose not to participate should be written off, ignored while those in power and their friends decide what to do with public money. It does mean that public administrators might use imagination (Box, 2001; 2005) and social conscience to keep in mind the effects of their actions and policy proposals on private lives. In a society structured to benefit those with greater financial resources, this sort of imagination can be an important part of the role of the public service practitioner.

Here is a brief example of an opportunity for a public professional to imagine the effects of progressive values on private lives and advocate for policy change. It is a real example and one in which the opportunity was missed. As part of a state-funded study of neighborhoods in a medium-sized city, I found that in one area there were no sidewalks near an elementary school. In this lower-income neighborhood, children were walking to school on the sides of traffic lanes in busy streets. There had
been no serious accidents to date resulting from this situation, but it seemed to be a matter of time. The city public works director allocated equal portions of infrastructure improvement funds to each political district from which council members are elected, so wealthy areas with good infrastructure received the same level of funding as poorer areas with inadequate infrastructure. After other improvement needs were met in this neighborhood, there were no funds available to build new sidewalks near the school.

I asked the public works director about this and was told that council members would be upset if their districts did not receive their “fair share,” so he was not going to raise the issue. Had he wished to advocate for policy change, he could have discussed the problem with the city manager and the mayor and/or council. He could have talked with neighborhood groups and community leaders to explore possible support for change. He could have recommended formation of a citizen’s advisory board for capital projects to study a range of issues, including allocation of infrastructure improvement funds. He could have declared a safety emergency and reallocated funds on his own authority.

I did not follow up in later years to discover whether anything had been done about this situation and the broader problem of equity in this city; it may be that significant progress has been made, or maybe not. For our purposes, this illustrates a situation ripe for advocacy, applying professional knowledge in the public interest to counter ideology in the service of private benefit, an opportunity to serve the value of limited inequality by eliminating a manifestation of cruelty.

Note

I do not believe that social science will “save the world”—a phrase which I take here to mean the avoidance of war and the re-arrangement of human affairs in accordance with the ideals of human freedom and reason.

Such knowledge as I have leads me to embrace rather pessimistic estimates of the chances. But even if that is where we now stand, still we must ask: If there are any ways out of the crises of our period by means of intellect, is it not up to the social scientist to state them?

—C. Wright Mills

_The Sociological Imagination_

(1959, p. 193)

How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers? . . . In addition, if it is extremely dangerous to say that Reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality.

—Michel Foucault

(Rabinow, 1984, p. 249)
The socially most important provocations will be offered by teachers who make vivid and concrete the failure of the country of which we remain loyal citizens to live up to its own ideals—the failure of America to be what it knows it ought to become.

—Richard Rorty

*Philosophy and Social Hope*

(1999, p. 123)

In this chapter I develop more fully the normative perspective used in the book, describing and applying it to teaching, analysis of societal conditions, uses of knowledge in public administration, and theory building. I recognize that, like anyone else, I come to the idea of progressive values through a particular, idiosyncratic set of experiences and preferences. The idea is much broader than my knowledge of it and it may be viewed in many ways that are different from mine. I can only introduce the concept using the tools I have, but I do not want their use to make others feel excluded because they do not especially like the conceptual framework presented here. Instead, I want this work to be contingent and inclusive, a way to stimulate new ideas.

Some strong views are expressed below, but not for the purpose of defining a rigid structure for progressive thought in public administration. On the contrary, the purpose of this narrative is to inspire readers to approach the idea of progressive thought from their particular perspectives, to find ways mine falls short and to invent creative new approaches.

In Chapter 1 I wrote that academicians affect public policy through teaching practitioners who “frequently work with the public and participate in policy processes” and also through teaching “future academicians who will pass along to succeeding generations of practitioners and scholars their ideas about purposes and values.” To this should be added the influence of published work, especially books that many practitioners and doctoral students use in their courses. Each practitioner the academician teaches has the potential to change the way things are done in her or his organization and each student who is a future academician may reach thousands of students over a career. Adding up these opportunities to influence the thinking of so many people, the potential for an academician’s ideas to ripple outward, affecting the goals, policies, and
behavior of governments and their effects on society is considerable. It is not unreasonable to suggest this potential carries with it a responsibility to be deliberate and self-aware in choosing values, content, and methods for one’s work.

**Beyond the Given: Normative Thought in Public Administration**

Expectations of academicians can be a source of frustration and anxiety. Coexistent with the idea that professors, protected by tenure, should present concepts that challenge student preconceptions and thus expand their view of the world, is the idea that professors are social scientists who should write and teach as “objectively” as possible. In some of the subject matter in public administration this contradiction may not appear to present a problem, because the concepts are relatively technical, fact-based, and uncontested; examples are contract management and fund accounting. However, not all areas of technical practice seem so value-free. For example, the apparently dry, technical budget is a central policy tool in public organizations; how it is created and to what extent it is built upon the wishes of the public are thoroughly value-laden matters. The (rather timeworn) point is that not much in public affairs is value-free. To the extent academicians limit themselves to measurement and description, avoiding normative thought that reaches beyond the given facts, teaching and research in public administration is disconnected from society and serves little purpose other than to educate efficient technicians and build tenure portfolios.

Not everyone in academic public administration has an easy time reconciling the contradictory views of teacher/writer as normative intellectual and teacher/writer as objective transmitter of facts. As editor for eight years of a journal that publishes articles written from postmodern, critical, feminist, psychological, and other “alternative” perspectives, I discovered that a number of people in the field, good scholars, are afraid to publish papers on topics that interest them for fear it would hurt their careers, and others are bored with teaching and writing about technical topics lacking broader significance. To this extent, I found evidence that the “objective transmitter” view exerts a chilling, restricting influence on the content of writing and teaching in public administration. As McSwite puts it, “This is no time for a faculty person to be offbeat, critical, or marginal, and we know it” (2002, p. 75).
Drawing a firm distinction between descriptive and normative approaches seems to me pointless and counterproductive (by normative I mean exploring the potential for change in observed phenomena, with whatever methods seem appropriate to the research question). Most readers will be familiar with the ongoing debate in social science and in public administration about “objectivist” and “relativist” perspectives on knowledge, perspectives that seem to roughly parallel preferences for research using standard empirical methods, and research based on logic and argument, historical analysis, a body of theory, and so on. In public administration, this debate has often taken the form of documenting methods used in dissertations, critiquing the work of other authors, and so on. It can become quite personal and people have a tendency to adopt “either-or” positions.

There is a long history attached to this debate. Among those concerned about the effects of the objectivist perspective, we find C. Wright Mills in 1959 writing about what he considered the meaningless number crunching of “abstracted empiricism.” Herbert Marcuse in 1964 warned against perceived positivist blindness to the potential for social change. Richard Bernstein (1983) tried to move ontological thought “beyond objectivism and relativism” to alleviate the “Cartesian anxiety” about finding certainty, and a host of authors over several decades have discussed and debated the fine points of ontology, epistemology, and research methods.

It may be argued that the differences between objectivists and relativists are softening, as recognition of the complexity of knowledge pushes people to understand that approaches other than their own are useful. (For a summary of perspectives on knowledge in public administration and the challenge of finding common ground, see Raadschelders, 2004; 2005.) Still, though, these differences have the power to push people into opposing camps. Apparently, the human tendency to hold narrow beliefs rather than to search for broader knowledge applies to academicians as well as to anyone else.

This seems an empty exercise because the existence of concrete, absolute knowledge cannot, at least by humans for the far-distant foreseeable future, be proven or disproven. Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson (1998) may be correct in his assertion of “consilience,” or unitary knowledge, the idea that all phenomena eventually boil down to physics, the movement of molecules, so that knowledge of human affairs and natural sciences is ultimately quantifiable. Maybe people thousands of years in the future will find themselves in possession of this sort of knowledge, but it will
not happen in the lifetimes of anyone reading this narrative, or anyone they will know or work with. In the meantime, it will probably be more productive to set aside the desire to assert authoritative certainty and get on with the work of understanding public affairs and changing things for the better.

Much of the worry about objectivism and relativism appears to result from mixing together the question of whether there is a “real” world external to human beings with the question of whether people can know its precise nature. I cannot imagine what it would mean, in public administration, to adopt the solipsistic position that there is no external reality. Of course, the existence of physical things can be tested by hitting one’s finger with a hammer or backing into another vehicle while parallel parking. Aside from the seemingly clear case of the reality of physical objects, the same can be said of human-created things such as organizations, ideas, goals, events. Analogues to the hammer and parking tests would include announcing intent to ignore the rules and expectations of one’s organization because they are only a figment of one’s imagination, or one could choose to stop paying taxes on the premise that taxation laws and enforcement agencies are imaginary. Either these human creations are “real” and must be dealt with accordingly, or they are not, and so may be ignored. The employee or taxpayer would no doubt discover which in short order.

It is difficult to conceive of meaningful ways to feel passionate about or wish to engage with the various examples of regressive and progressive thought and action used in this book if one does not think they exist. Yes, each observer or participant may perceive them differently, but it is pointless to claim they do not exist while one experiences them and becomes part of their reality (plus, many of them are so pressing and disturbing that debating whether they are real almost seems mad). If one believed that no external reality exists, it would indeed be pointless to think about the world in normative terms, since one cannot change what is not there. I like the way Rorty makes the distinction between the world as it is and the world as people perceive and describe it:

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot. (1989, p. 5; italics added)
In other words, we perceive the world as we will, deciding what we think is true or not, but the existence of the world does not depend on these perceptions and decisions. When new information is added to our experience, according to William James, “The new contents themselves are not true, they simply come and are. Truth is what we say about them . . .” (1907, p. 62). Gary Wamsley (1996, p. 392) offers a similar view of knowledge in public administration. He recognizes “there are conceivably as many social realities as there are people, social constructs, and situations” and that in daily work we accept the external world as given. With this complexity,

It is useful to bear in mind at least three domains of reality that are useful to us: the “my” world of the individual, which we generally treat as subjective-expressive; “the” world of external nature, which we generally treat as “objective” and “factual”; and the “our” world of collectivities, which we generally treat as interactive-intersubjective.

Description of empirical conditions, reality as perceived by an observer, serves as a starting point for theory building and normative thought. (Not quantitative description, necessarily, but empirical description that can be quantitative or qualitative, and not necessarily scholarly description, but in the broadest sense writing and speaking about observed or experienced phenomena.) Normative thought provides meaning in practice to description of conditions, making description useful to people doing the work of public administration. Without description of conditions, normative thought would be meaningless, since there would be no knowledge of what could be changed. Without normative thought, description of conditions would remain a scholarly exercise with relatively little value for practice, thus relatively little value in an applied professional field. So, description and prescription reflexively need each other—they are not unrelated or conflicting, but are instead integral parts of knowledge.

None of this is to say that people do not have preferences. Many have more use for findings from empirical research than for normative and theoretical narrative—and the reverse—and some prefer a bit of both. Qualitative empirical work “speaks to” some people more than does quantitative work—and the reverse—and some are comfortable with either. There seems to be little reason this should be problematic, little reason for anyone to assert that certain forms of research are not valid, since all have the option to read and make use of whatever materials they choose. I do not mean to slight the question of quality of research, of adherence
to commonly accepted standards for technique, or to claim that obvious lack of rigorous thought or rationality is acceptable. I mean only to suggest that judgments about research in public administration based on a desire to prove that one’s perspective is the best serve no epistemological purpose and are potentially damaging to knowledge building. (I wrote a paper, published in *Public Administration Review* in 1992, in which I argued against a long series of papers that found public administration research lacking in rigor, especially quantitative rigor, and thus deficient. Though my argument may have seemed anti-objectivist, it was intended to defend multiple approaches against one-sided claims.)

There is quite a range of normative thought in public administration, thought based on a rich variety of theoretical perspectives. Some of it is quite abstract and difficult to connect with daily practice, and some of it is more useful at the level of political action and policy building than it is to administration. I admit to finding some public administration research and theory difficult to understand because it is methodologically complex, particularly abstract, or based on concepts with which I am not very familiar, and to finding some of this material so remote from practice that I do not think it useful for what I am doing today. However, some people do understand this material and find it useful; someday, in different circumstances, I may as well.

The primary purpose of normative thought, for me, is to explore alternative futures in the service of particular preferences about public administration and society. This need not be an exercise in advocating radical abandonment of current practices or social, political, and economic arrangements, but a matter of understanding what might be done tomorrow that is different from today. The ends, or values, served by normative thought may be almost anything. I focus in this book on what I have called progressive values in public administration practice because I feel a need to respond in a certain way to conditions around me and I like to think about the relationship of public administration practice to the broader society. Other authors may write at the level of the policy process or at the level of organizations and they may write in the context of any number of preferred ends.

By definition, to engage in normative thought is to accept the possibility that people can effect change, that they can exercise agency in redirecting the future. The perspective on agency found in this book shows the influence of structural determinism, not to the point of surrendering to the idea that people are normalized, imprisoned specks in an inescapable web, but
in recognizing that history, societal complexity, and experience bind us and make it difficult to move beyond the given, that is, beyond our current perception of possibilities for thought and action. As Rorty put it, “Be aware of yourself as at the mercy of the contingencies of your upbringing and your culture and your environment” (1998b, p. 62). Part of retaining a sense of possibility, despite the characteristics of society described by a critical approach, means to be open to new combinations of old ideas and to redescription of concepts that have for one reason or another been discarded. It also means rejecting the passive attitude or theoretical ennui that comes from avoiding “metanarrative”; in a world full of powerful people enacting a global economic metanarrative, ignoring what is happening hardly seems useful. We can choose to adopt a narrative or a set of values that we think fits us well and might produce a better world, and we can do this without being trapped in a search for timeless principles.

Parts of theories are used here that help in understanding observed patterns and considering normative options and they may be used in ways that would displease their authors and some scholars. Herbert Marcuse and Richard Rorty might not approve of how I handle their work, nor of the way they are used together to support a particular vision of critical social theory and progressive change. Some academicians might find it objectionable to paste together portions of the thought of people whose views and life experiences seem so different (a German critical theorist of the Frankfurt School who fled from the Nazis, and an American postmodern neo-pragmatist often portrayed as a philosophical renegade). However, I think the relevant question is not whether damage is done to the holistic consistency of a given body of theory, but whether good tools have been found for the work at hand. This is a pragmatic attitude, one in which “Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest” (James, 1907, p. 53). If this book were to be revised in a few years, there might be some differences in materials used (or maybe not), depending on the conditions and purposes at hand at the time. None of this relieves the author of the responsibility to establish some coherence between the materials used, but it frees the narrative from making use of all the features of a particular theoretical view. (For example, one might use Marcuse’s concept of containment without necessarily accepting his pessimism about the possibilities for change within the given order.)

A notable difficulty in normative thought comes from the narrowing of language resulting from critique and changing intellectual fashion.
The word “Enlightenment” became especially problematic following Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), for example, and many more useful and interesting words are today difficult to use in public administration theory without a feeling of awkwardness, of seeming to present oneself as a bit ignorant, old-fashioned, or iconoclastic. Enlightenment is one of those words, but there are others many readers would recognize as problematic, such as reason, rationality, logic, progressive, expertise, professionalism, humanism, and reality, and there are others we might find awkward to use after reading the work of authors who have been busy deconstructing comfortable intellectual portions of the field.

What a thing that we would come to be wary of words like “reality”! (I should avoid noting that this seems unreal, but I won’t.) Certainly, to the extent the person using that word means to refer to a timeless, irrefutable principle or assumed certainty of perception, many of us would recoil from the inherent foundationalism. But the word is also a convenient way to refer to a contingent description of perceptions, one that may change in the next instant. It is easy enough to shun words as misleading at best or as evidence of lack of intellectual sophistication at worst. However, this seems self-contradictory; if an important feature of informed thought is understanding multiple meanings and the development of concepts, then redescribed words can be used effectively in an ongoing process of knowledge building. A word in its redescribed form is a shortcut to an understanding between an author and readers of a conceptual history that includes the earlier “baggage” and the renewed meaning. In this form it is a rich and useful concept that adds to intellectual dialogue. The epigram from Foucault at the head of this chapter captures the ambiguity and difficulty of this problem of words. In summarizing the point, in an interview Foucault said:

If intellectuals in general are to have a function, if critical thought itself has a function, and, even more specifically, if philosophy has a function within critical thought, it is precisely to accept this sort of spiral, this sort of revolving door of rationality that refers us to its necessity, to its indisponsability, and at the same time, to its intrinsic dangers. (In Rabinow, 1984, p. 249)

My worry is that excluding useful words because they carry an undesirable residue from the past renders public administration dialogue weaker and less effective in dealing with current problems. This is not to say that any word fits any situation or that care need not be exercised, but that some words simply do good work in certain circumstances. To use
an example from a city near me, decisions were made a few years ago about the pension system for public safety workers that have resulted in dozens of people retiring in their forties and fifties with monthly pension checks much larger than the salaries they received on the job, larger in some cases than the salaries of some current upper-level city officials. This situation is, from the perspective of standards of (professional?) management, __________. How should this blank space be filled? I want to type in “irrational,” but if that means I am accepting a hegemonic, exclusive view of “reason,” the word should not be used. The reader may think of other acceptable words to fill this space, though we probably want to avoid the colloquial, such as “stupid,” or “foolish,” as well as words that express judgments about individuals, such as “incompetent.”

Of course, all I mean to say is there are commonly accepted standards of practice in municipalities that do not usually include this sort of action. Such standards are created over time by career professionals, working in concert with elected leaders who reflect the thinking of their constituents about what is and what is not appropriate in local government pensions. In this context-limited sense, “irrational” is an excellent word to use, despite the baggage it might take on in other settings. It recognizes that some actions are within, and some are outside, commonly understood standards of practice, that to operate outside the area of accepted standards may lead to results many people will think inappropriate, unfortunate, and damaging to the city, and that to do so intentionally is not something ordinarily prudent, knowledgeable, well-meaning people will do.

Arguments may be given, one case at a time, for use of disputed words in redescribed form. Sometimes it probably is not necessary to articulate such an argument; most likely few people would be upset by the use of “irrational” in the example above. In other situations, though, it is best to examine and explain the intended redescribed meaning, as I have done in this book with words and terms such as “progressive” and “public interest.” I think these can be useful, constructive words, as can some other words that have come to seem problematic, so I feel free to critically examine and then redescribe them, letting the reader sort out whether the result is satisfying or unacceptable.

Against the Grain: Teaching Progressive Values

Most academicians in public administration teach in master’s and doctoral programs, with students of widely varying ages and academic
backgrounds. Generalization about all public administration students entering master’s programs is of course difficult, but an “average” might be described in relation to knowledge about the public sector. A generalization that seems to be supported informally by what professors say about student preparation is that American schools up to the graduate level do a poor job of teaching students about government. The knowledge people have about this as they enter a master’s program in public administration is, as one student described it to me years ago, “pastel pink and blue.” She meant the narrative is one-dimensional, a rosy, consensual, linear historical trend line of progress and betterment. Beginning master’s students often have only sketchy knowledge of the national founding and subsequent history, political, social, and economic conditions, relationships between economic classes and races, and governmental structures, processes, and federalism. This is a bit disturbing, since this is a self-selected group of people who are interested in the public sector, and we might assume that a significant percentage of the voting public will know even less than they do about government.

In addition to the problem of preparation, the perspective of critical social theory would predict that students come to programs with relatively little knowledge of concepts associated with progressive values, and this is often true. The dominant discourse in the media and in textbooks and other course materials would be expected to present a perspective comforting to current elites, rather than one that captures the conflict, passion, and ongoing dialectic of the American experiment. For example, the American founding experience was one of prolonged and sometimes intense conflict (both in discourse and physical action) between people with very different views about power, class, the distribution of wealth, the relationship of the individual to the collectivity, and how government should be structured. Many people today, including many of our beginning students, are only aware of the views of the “winners,” so they lack a conceptual framework for understanding current debates about issues such as centralization and decentralization, federalism, and citizen self-governance.

As another example, students generally know little about local government and are unaware of the dialectic between advocates of professionalized “reform” government and defenders of political responsiveness during the Progressive Era, and the forms in which this dialectic continues today. To the extent they are aware, they may have been given a simplified good-and-bad view that ignores important issues such as social inequality and public access to the policy-making process. The same can be said of the
origins of the nonprofit sector and social welfare system during the Progressive Era; students are often unaware of the activism and sacrifice of reformers such as the people involved in the settlement house movement.

When these narratives are stripped of their gritty, dynamic quality, they become boring factual statements about key events and outcomes, of little use for shaping constructive change in contemporary public affairs. This is serious, since most of the issues about which people argued and sometimes fought during earlier periods are with us today, both in broad policy debates and in the details of delivering public services. Understanding how and why these issues have developed would seem to be especially important for public professionals who have the potential to influence new policy initiatives and to shape implementation.

It can be difficult to introduce students to the rich history and dialectical nature of the public sector, for at least three reasons. One is that, in a media-saturated environment with electronic gadgets and communication, and in a society that only half-heartedly educates citizens about culture and history, many people are not particularly interested in how the past has shaped the present. Times of significant social change that affected the course of history and the political and economic culture of the nation—such as the Founding Era, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression and the New Deal, world wars, the Cold War, the 1960s and the Vietnam Era, plus significant social movements such as those for women’s suffrage, civil rights, and the environment—are to many contemporary students hazy events of uncertain importance for their daily lives. Second, people can be distracted and misled by symbolic issues, spectacle and entertainment, and cover stories, and they can be discouraged by fear of social sanction from considering perspectives that do not fit the dominant political and economic narrative. Third, students often come to graduate school seeking technical management education, a list of effective techniques that can be plugged into their organizations, not to gain a broader perspective on society that would prepare them to lead in shaping the public sector as well as to follow adopted policy. The simplistic good-evil, us-them dichotomies citizens are fed by the corporate media can be carried into the classroom, contributing to unease with complexity and ambiguity.

These circumstances can of course vary by geographical area and academic program, and many students everywhere respond with interest and enthusiasm to new perspectives. Nevertheless, using progressive values in teaching can “run against the grain” of contemporary society, challeng-
ing academicians to give additional thought to approach and technique. The challenges and responses are different at the doctoral level, where teachers may be more open and direct about normative thought, including progressive values and conflicting perspectives. At both levels, though, the goal is to move beyond superficial opinion (belief) created by the conditions described above, toward knowledge of multiple perspectives, setting aside judgment until sufficient information is available.

Professors can show students the complexity, ambiguity, and contradictions inherent in contemporary public institutions, suggesting there are more choices available within the historical/institutional legacy than those about which they have been taught. It has been my experience that this process is most successful when it moves incrementally, elaborating on commonly accepted beliefs rather than immediately confronting them—for example, a step-by-step recounting of conditions and events leading up to the dialogue between Anti-Federalists and Federalists can make contemporary lessons taken from Anti-Federalist thought more palatable, much as description of the development of local democracy, the immigrant experience, and urban conditions in the Progressive Era can make alternative views of reform and professionalism in local government more understandable.

During this experience, as teachers and as scholars, academicians model the use of imagination as they discuss multiple perspectives involving regressive and progressive values. We can hope that, over time, this produces practice and scholarship that advances progressive values. Rorty (1999, p. 124) makes this point well, as he writes:

The social function of American colleges is to help the students see that the national narrative around which their socialization has centred is an open-ended one. . . . This is done by helping the students realize that, despite the progress that the present has made over the past, the good has once more become the enemy of the better. With a bit of help, the students will start noticing everything that is paltry and mean and unfree in their surroundings. With luck, the best of them will succeed in altering the conventional wisdom, so that the next generation is socialized in a somewhat different way than they themselves were socialized.

Acceptance and Refusal: Analysis of Current Conditions

In our daily lives, how much attention should we give to societal and global conditions, and how upset and gloomy should we be about condi-
tions that seem especially disturbing to us? Most of us live in relatively comfortable circumstances, with opportunities from which to choose and an institutional and physical environment that protects our ability to think and act, within broad limits. We are usually not directly exposed to violence, prejudice, poverty, war, death, and environmental destruction, but encounter these mostly through the media, which often waters down and sanitizes their impact. We become accustomed to more subtle conditions of which we might disapprove in concept, and so only occasionally do they draw our special attention (such as when national government makes decisions allowing destruction of portions of the Everglades, clear-cutting old growth, or allowing mining or gas extraction in fragile natural areas, or when local governments permit ugly, unsustainable, environmentally costly development). How much attention one gives to societal conditions might depend on several factors, including occupation, family, and the amount of time available, personal convictions, and the particular conditions in evidence at the time. Responses could include changing one’s voting preferences, making contributions to interest groups or occasionally writing to a representative, reading extensively about societal conditions, participating actively in group efforts, writing or speaking on issues, and physically resisting authority and risking injury or incarceration.

Academicians who intend to teach or write about issues relating to progressive values may want to decide what conditions are especially important, acute, in need of immediate attention—this will depend in large part on one’s specialized interests (urban, financial, or social conditions, leadership, and so on). The wish to address progressive values may be a long-time passion or a response to recent events, and it may be linked to any of a number of schools of thought. My preference for critical social theory and neopragmatism makes me a skeptic, ready to find self-interest, abuse, and cruelty in human affairs, but also ready to find constructive ways to ameliorate negative conditions. (This is, incidentally, not dissimilar to the positions on human nature and governance taken in The Federalist Papers.)

I have written for years on application of critical social theory to public administration, but only recently have I felt the need to respond directly to current, immediate circumstances, to bring theory to bear in a more direct, applied way. The reader may think this work slips over a boundary from theory to polemic, which may be true. It is possible this project may in later years seem dated because it is tied to a state of affairs
that has passed, but I suspect not. The situation today is larger than life, exaggerated, but similar things have happened before and these conditions bring into bold relief concepts like progressive values. Though in several years the current amplification of regressive values may largely have passed, the same thing could have been said a few years after the McCarthy Era, the Vietnam War, and so on, but here we are again—the need for attention to these issues in American society will continue.

The question in such a situation is how to recognize when regressive conditions warrant immediate attention, when they seem to demand a specific, focused response in scholarly work. It will be useful to draw upon two concepts from Marcuse in developing a way to do this: refusal and surplus-repression. Refusal is a decision to reject an aspect of existing conditions that one can no longer accept. Marcuse (writing in the early 1960s) describes contemporary society as a “warfare and welfare state” in which certain human qualities are regarded as “asocial and unpatriotic” (1964, p. 242). These qualities include: “the refusal of all toughness, togetherness, and brutality; disobedience to the tyranny of the majority; . . . a sensitive intelligence sickened by that which is being perpetrated . . .” (1964, p. 242). Marcuse quotes a description of refusal written by Maurice Blanchot:

> There is a reason which we no longer accept, there is an appearance of wisdom which horrifies us, there is a plea for agreement and conciliation which we will no longer heed. A break has occurred. We have been reduced to that frankness which no longer tolerates complicity. (Blanchot, in Marcuse, 1964, p. 256)

In short, in some times, in some places, for some reasons, acceptance is not an option. Refusal is an act of withdrawal and isolation, but it can serve as the beginning point for resistance to regressive thought and behavior. However, more is needed to recognize when the point of refusal has been reached. Marcuse made the observation that people need to moderate their behavior to live together, that society requires “‘modifications’ of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization” (1955, p. 35). This was his description of “repression” in society, and he distinguished it from “surplus-repression,” social domination that exists in excess of basic repression, “additional controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association” (1955, p. 37).
This is an interesting construct, but I want to borrow the idea of “surplus,” separating it from repression to use as an aid in identifying when regressive values have become unacceptably influential. Instead of surplus repression, we might describe a surplus of regressive conditions, the extent to which enactment of regressive values exceeds levels people have come to accept. This assumes, in keeping with the description in Chapter 1 of continuums of regressive and progressive values, that a certain amount of regressive thought and behavior is to be expected in a particular society at a particular point in time. It may not be possible to predict how much of this will be acceptable (which is another way of saying that a deontological ethics of regressive values is difficult to imagine). However, when people begin to speak and write in opposition to the current level of regressive thought and behavior, the conditions they refuse to accept represent for them a surplus in regressive values, offending their sense of humane and reasonable conduct—they perceive a contradiction between acceptable norms and current conditions.

What is acceptable and what is surplus is a matter of individual preference, shaped by exposure to experiences and societal culture. For some, only the grossest demonstration of regressive values may appear surplus (use of atomic weapons in war when other weapons would suffice, clear-cutting forests so rapidly they cannot regenerate, shooting dozens of minority protestors in a central city, conspicuous corruption in city land development decisions). For others, thresholds above which regressive values become surplus may be much lower (any war other than in defense of one’s national territory, almost any clear-cutting, failing to alleviate the conditions that provoke people to protest in central cities, allowing elites undue influence in city land development decisions).

I find convincing and useful a description of society informed by critical social theory and have used it to write about the relationship of public administration to the broader society. My perception of an acceptable level of regressive thought and behavior is likely to be different from those of some other people, simply because of the time I spend thinking about such things. I have for decades thought that regressive values play too great a role in American society, though I did not think of it using the term regressive values; probably my earliest realization of this was during the years of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, followed by the Vietnam Era. The first led to sensitivity about issues of poverty and race, the second to awareness of militarism and interventionist war. With the knowledge I gained of the influence of local elites on community governance during
thirteen years as a practitioner, it is not overstatement to say that I have long found the level of regressive thought and behavior in the public sector to be unacceptable, surplus. Clearly, people much more directly affected by regressive values than I, including minorities, activists, and the poor understand in a far more immediate way than do I what this sort of surplus means. My voice is that of a middle-class white professional, albeit one who is quite critical of regressive thought and behavior.

I know that among my peers and the students with whom I work mine is not the majority view, and that this carries a responsibility to speak and write in ways that most people find reasonable rather than foolish or radical. (McSwite [2002, p. 68] writes of the response of colleagues to the publication of one of their books: “In their eyes, I had become too critical, too alienated, too nihilistic, and thus too far from the central identity of public administration.”) In part, this reasonable tone can be sustained by tying critical social theory to American history and the practicalities of public administration. However, for me a break has occurred like the one of which Blanchot wrote. The sustained, greedy assault on the environment, the intended, almost gleeful redistribution of wealth upward, the narrowing of civil liberties, and the pointless, vicious killing of countless people have left me too angry to ignore the surplus in regressive thought and behavior. When you read this, things may be better (for the time being). But today in the Middle East, for example, millions of people have been driven from their homes, recent estimates suggest that somewhere between 80,000 and as many as 1.2 million Iraqis have been killed since the U.S. invasion, American leaders are committed to pursuing this course of action for years or decades, and the intervention was supported by many millions of Americans.

At the beginning of World War II, the national government ordered approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans (60,000 of them were American citizens) to be removed from their homes on short notice and sent away to concentration camps (euphemistically called “relocation centers”) in remote areas, for years. Though this action was not connected to a rational security concern, some Americans immediately turned on their neighbors, pleased that the “Japs” were being sent away. (But some did not believe this could happen in America, and others offered to store the belongings of people who were taken away.) This sort of regressive herd mentality can be found during a number of eras in the nation’s history; it occurred again in the period directly preceding and following the invasion of Iraq. Despite the obvious parallel with earlier interventionist wars, there was
no mass public resistance in response to the seemingly irrational and phony reasons given for the invasion of Iraq, but instead nationalistic support for invasion and occupation. The quite public information available about the characteristics of that country and its weak and broken regime, the serious challenges in many other parts of the world, and the lessons learned from similar misadventures in the past—none of these prompted a general, sustained upwelling of protest from a people easily deceived by belief. This would seem to have been the perfect time for refusal, but it was not.

Is it possible for public administration, the professional public service, to be unaffected by the growing, expanding display of regressive values in society and in the public sector, at so many levels and on so many crucial issues? Should public service practitioners and academicians who find this unacceptable feel a sense of responsibility to respond, and if so in what ways, given our unique roles in society? The question at hand is not what should be done in a particular policy situation, but rather how to increase public knowledge of conditions around us and the potential for progressive change so that, when political and economic elites lead the country in directions that appear to be contrary to the interests of the majority of the population, citizens are better equipped to understand what is happening and are more likely to resist instead of giving willing approval. Yes, this is about discourse processes, about “coming to public judgment” (Yankelovich, 1991), deliberative democracy, and so on, but beyond that, it is about the values enacted during those processes.

Progressive solutions to public problems are regularly discounted or ridiculed by people who defend the status quo or prefer a return to earlier times of supposed unbridled economic greed and a public sector too small and weak to address the consequences. The arguments against progressive action are usually based on the assumption that the liberal-capitalist political/economic system is the natural default mode of human affairs. In this mode, left alone by government, people will spontaneously organize themselves into a relatively peaceful and competitive free market with an open, pluralistic political system, in which the basic unit of analysis and action is the autonomous individual advancing his or her private economic interests.

There may be, or may have been, times and places in which this model would accurately describe reality, at least in part (though in the United States it would have been quite some time ago). Little remains of it in pure form in developed nations, which are characterized by the
dominance of large corporations, institutionalized systems of finance and law, a mixed economy with significant public-sector regulatory and financial intervention, and global economic interests.

In the contemporary United States, it is a false argument to compare the political and economic status quo to the failed authoritarian-collectivist schemes of the twentieth century, to claim the comparison demonstrates that regressive rather than progressive values are the appropriate way forward. This is a common technique among defenders of regressive values: label alternatives as “socialist,” “communist,” or “anti-American,” hoping these scare words will make open discussion of progressive alternatives difficult (as they often do). Rather, the question at hand is whether to change things in society that are, as Rorty puts it in the quotation above, “paltry and mean and unfree.” This is a matter of moving the emphasis in American society a bit toward progressive values on the regressive-progressive continuum, working to reverse some of the damage that is being done.

This is but one person’s analysis of contemporary conditions and the point at which the extent of regressive thought and behavior becomes unacceptable, prompting forms of “refusal” and constructive work toward progressive solutions. I invite the reader to consider how these concepts fit her or his perception of history and the current state of society and public administration.

Contingent Theory

As suggested at the beginning of the chapter, my intent is to offer a personal perspective on normative teaching and scholarship as a way to prompt, enrich, and facilitate discussion of progressive values in public administration. I hope that readers, agreeing with the general goal of making progressive values more prevalent in the future than they are today, will add to or substitute their perspectives on teaching and scholarship for mine, multiplying the approaches we can bring to bear on the problem. I am not as concerned about developing a consistent body of theory as I am about creating the conditions for social change, using theory as a framework for understanding what might be changed and the possible implications of doing so.

I occasionally read a critique of this or that normative work, claiming the author failed to present a fully developed theory so his or her ideas cannot be taken as seriously as they would otherwise have been. I
write with full awareness that this narrative may be read by any number of colleagues whose knowledge of philosophy, epistemology, history, research methodology, and so on is deeper than mine. This is a good reason to abandon any pretense to a fully developed theory, even if I thought myself capable of creating one. What I want to offer is, first, the concept of progressive values as a guide to research, teaching, and practice, and second, a conceptual framework others may adapt to their purposes. Outlined below are three categories of thought that summarize some of the concepts presented thus far in the book. The categories and their contents should be taken as contingent, both in the sense that they represent current thinking subject to change, and in the sense that the reader may have ideas about how they could be improved.

**Analytic Approach**

- Observed human behavior includes seeking competitive advantage in a resource-constrained environment.
- The power of government is often used to promote the interests of the few at the expense of the many.
- Contemporary society is characterized by containment of thought and diminishing knowledge of alternatives.
- Direct citizen discourse on public issues is desirable in a democracy, but in contemporary society it is often impractical, making the role of public service practitioners as facilitators and educators especially important.

**Use of Knowledge**

- A personal passion for change can be linked to the concept of progressive values.
- The socially embedded individual is the unit of analysis.
- Critical analysis identifies contradictions between surplus regressive thought and action and progressive values; this is an immanent approach, developed from within national history and institutions.
- An inside as contrasted with an outside perspective is used, focusing on the potential for public service professionals to advance progressive values, rather than on societal control of bureaucracy.
- A neo-pragmatic approach to knowledge avoids foundationalism and
bases choices on individual experience and perception of history, culture, environment, politics, economics, and so on.

- Multiple approaches to knowledge are recognized, avoiding debates about objectivism and relativism.
- Progressive values can be integrated into teaching and scholarship, connecting them to more familiar and non-threatening knowledge.

### Agency and Action

- From Herbert Marcuse: Imagination and hope for the possibility of change.
- From Richard Rorty: A progressive humanist concern about effects of societal practices.
- Thought and action advocate change within the existing order.
- Structures and webs of power are viewed as constraining factors, but they do not prevent individual action taken in the hope of making a difference.
- There are opportunities for public service professionals and academicians to take actions that increase public knowledge of alternatives and possibilities for creating progressive social change.

### Note

5

Toward a Progressive Public Administration

The dominant fact of the world right now, it seems clear, is that free market capitalism has reached a position of hegemony. Many are raising and discussing the question of whether government is needed at all.

—O. C. McSwite
Invitation to Public Administration
(2002, p. 86)

I think nothing is going to happen until you can get the masses to stop thinking of the bureaucrats as the enemy, and start thinking of the bosses as the enemy.

—Richard Rorty
Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies
(1998b, p. 33)

And I will tell you now that when any man in our nation has the courage to stand up and challenge the accustomed and is therefore accused of being a sensationalist do not trust that accusation. In the accusation there speaks, usually, the self-styled conservative in our country—than which I know of nothing more wearisome as obstruction to growth.

—Frank Lloyd Wright
“Speech to the AFA,” 1939
The opening theme, as well as the title, of the book is “making a difference” and the intervening narrative has discussed ways that public professionals and academicians can advance progressive values in public administration. The five regressive-progressive value pairs I have chosen (aggressiveness/cooperation, belief/knowledge, economics as end/economics as means, great inequality/limited inequality, and Earth as resource/Earth as home) are a reflection of personal interests and concerns, shaped in part by events during the past few years. Readers may think of different values they would emphasize, and so might I at a different point in time. The range of potential values that can influence action in the public sector is considerable. (An especially comprehensive inventory of values is found in Montgomery Van Wart’s [1998] book, *Changing Public Sector Values.* Cheryl Simrell King and Lisa Zanetti [2005] describe characteristics of public servants who work for social change in their book *Transformational Public Service.*) However, here I address a different values issue, moving American public affairs in a particular direction on a continuum of regressive and progressive values, thus encouraging constructive social change.

This narrative leaves mostly unanswered the question of what motivates people to work toward progressive values, except to say that it begins with a passion for change driven by something in current conditions that seems unacceptable. Each person’s experiences, professional role, and interpretation of historical, cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts may lead her or him to identify contradictions between what is and what should be, between acceptable and surplus levels of regressive thought and action.

The idea of shifting values in public affairs from the regressive to the progressive end of a continuum comes from a heightened awareness of the effects of private interest over public purpose, of the intensification of societal characteristics Marcuse called “one-dimensional.” When Marcuse wrote of this concept, in the 1960s, it was thought too radical by many and it has since been largely forgotten. One reason it has been forgotten is that history—or more accurately American political culture—has not been kind to Marcuse, who is now often dismissed as a disaffected extremist from the radical ’60s. (He *was* disaffected and his positions *were* radical compared to the mainstream; that does not, however, mean that the key points of his analysis of society were incorrect or unusable.) I think another reason Marcuse’s concept of one-dimensionality has been forgotten is that the conditions he described are today simply the way things are, invisible because familiar. The way he characterized
society at the time was out of step with mainstream thought because there remained some vestige of societal knowledge of alternatives, some ways of living that were different from the dominant liberal-capitalist paradigm. There are multiple ways to label the situation today, but to the extent the “end of history” means that people cannot see alternatives to what is, one-dimensionality is a useful construct for understanding current circumstances. In this narrative, I have also explored the characteristics of current conditions using Arthur Schlesinger’s cycles of private interest and public purpose and description of times during which regressive and progressive values have been especially evident.

The current setting in which we find ourselves exhibits intensification of regressive values, which may be interpreted as the expected development of one-dimensional liberal-capitalist society or as a periodic cycle in American politics. Another tool for understanding the current situation is the rise of neoliberalism and the dominance of the market. This idea in some ways parallels one-dimensionality and, since it is often discussed in public affairs, it offers a useful perspective. McSwite describes the influence of the market metaphor in public affairs like this:

> At present we seem to be so exaggerating the efficacy of the market as a device for social decision and action that it is starting to take the place of all other civil, social, relationships. We are beginning to think that it can be applied as a universal and ubiquitous principle by which everything can be organized and done, even government. (2002, p. 104)

Gary Wamsley (1996, p. 395) summarized the effects of this situation nicely in the second of the Blacksburg “refounding” books:

> Our economic system (or better said, our political economy) obscures the meaning of democracy by linking the ideas of citizenship with the role of customer, and confusing product and lifestyle choices with policy choices that affect the quality of our lives. Our political system operates (largely unconsciously, systematically, and on the basis of anticipated reactions) so that the privileged position of economic elites is seldom threatened; and the political efficacy of middle and lower classes is increasingly limited in a variety of informal ways and by seemingly “natural” circumstances as one descends the socioeconomic scale.

Parts of this book have discussed some of the effects of neoliberalism. It emerges in the public sector as an identifiable phenomenon during
the Reagan administration in the 1980s, with privatization, tax cuts for upper-income people, increases in military spending, cuts in domestic programs, and a weakening of environmental regulation (epitomized by the Superfund scandal, in which the administration neutralized legislation by failing to take required actions). It is easy enough to view this trend as a deliberate reversal of progressive action that began in the Progressive Era and New Deal. This reversal leveled off a bit during the 1990s but intensified, with renewed vigor, beginning in 2001. Paralleling neoliberal events in policy and practice have been changes in the academic study of public affairs and administration, with greater emphasis on economic efficiency, measurement and performance, non-governmental actors and networks, security, and so on.

It is good to recognize the gains made from approaching government from an economic perspective. The economic perspective provides a certain reality-based discipline to discussion of what government should and can do and it promotes innovation and useful reform. Use of economics and the metaphor of the market become problematic, however, when they diminish other perspectives on the public sector, such as law, democracy, social justice, and public interest, when they distract us from human needs that are not easily met using calculation, competition, and force.

Also, it is good to recognize that government has grown in size and scope in ways that few in the founding generation foresaw or intended. This book should not be read as a big-government polemic. Its author is a bit of a Jeffersonian, sad to find that classical liberalism cannot cope with contemporary society and that even a moderate classical republicanism seems to have faded from view. This (rather traditional American) orientation leads one to advocate public intervention cautiously, paying attention to the importance of state and local governance in a federal system and to the effects of governmental action on private lives. Progressive values do not necessarily mean a large increase in the overall size and scope of government. For example, at the national level military expenditure would probably be significantly lower if progressive values were more prominent, and though domestic expenditures might well rise, the overall cost of government could be either lower or higher. Also, at any level of government, practices and investment grounded in progressive values that are more expensive in the short term could be less so in the long term (for example, improving jobs and education in the central city might later reduce costs of welfare and prisons).
“Small Junctures of Theory and Practice”

Whatever it is in each of us that generates a passion for change, the central argument of this book is that the current situation is particularly regressive and it is time for “push back” from public service practitioners and academicians against a surplus of regressive thought and action. Some people are already doing this and we can hope to encourage others to do so as well.

The conceptual framework of the book is not intended to exclude other ways to approach the idea of progressive values, nor should it be used to generalize inappropriately about people or groups. The motivations of citizens, elected representatives, and public service practitioners and academicians are multiple and diverse. Using critical social theory and neopragmatism, I have presented a particular view of human motivation and behavior, but in the real world it can happen that citizen interests coincide with those of altruistic governing elites, practitioners work to protect private lives and assist people to participate in governance, and there are innumerable examples of benevolence and care for the public interest. The case studies presented by King and Zanetti (2005) of practitioners who work in a spirit of social transformation are compelling examples of this sort of motivation. The purpose here is not to gloss over all that is good and useful, but to identify those things we think can be improved, using progressive values as a guide. As we consider how to contribute to constructive change, progressive values can be used to construct systems, organizations, programs, daily practices, and individual public service roles with care to minimize damage to people and the physical environment. These values can be used to make public decision making and action as empowering and enriching as possible given current societal conditions and the difficulties of identifying and communicating with a public. We can employ critical imagination and make people aware of alternatives to existing conditions and practices, alternatives that might produce a more humane, satisfying, sustainable future.

This is a very different message about the public sector than the one that has been dominant during the past several decades. That message has been about controlling government and reshaping it, using a masculine preference for tight, slim, measurable performance in obedient pursuit of economic efficiency. Efficiency is necessary, but for some deeply human reason it easily grows into an obsession, drowning out the reasons why an active, engaged, imaginative public sector is so important in contemporary urban/industrial/technological society.
The idea for this book came from observation of recent events and, though I do not want it to become firmly tied to current events and politics, the connections are unavoidable. In *The Conscience of a Liberal*, Paul Krugman (2007) argues that a new age of progressive politics is beginning. Obviously, I would be in favor of such a shift should it occur. However, a reprieve from the current surplus of regressive thought and action may be only temporary and some of us would like to move the balance further toward progressive values in a more permanent way. This means working from “the inside,” building knowledge and decision-making capacity person by person, changing aggregate public knowledge and values from the ground up.

To help in that process, there are often some people whose imagination and willingness to write and speak against regressive tendencies in society can inspire progressive change. As we have seen, for decades authors have been describing the formation and intensification of the contemporary American situation I have outlined here using critical social theory and neopragmatism. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s people like C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse described a nexus of money, power, and war, building a warning about the future from observation of the early stages of what today we might call neoliberalism, economistic thought, or global capitalism.

Since then, a number of authors have joined in critical analysis of modern, or postmodern, society. Every now and then in public administration and closely related fields, someone will write of the past and the future in ways that, for me, provoke thought outside the given and prompt reexamination of reality. I find that quality in, among others, the books of Ben Agger, Benjamin Barber, David John Farmer, Charles Fox and Hugh Miller, Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, Cheryl Simrell King and Lisa Zanetti, and O. C. McSwite (and, of course, Herbert Marcuse and Richard Rorty). As an example, I recently found a passage in McSwite’s *Invitation to Public Administration*, published in 2002, to which I had paid little attention on first reading a few years ago. Now, it seems a striking illustration of applying a theoretical framework to the immediate future with such accuracy and coherence that in retrospect it can seem startling. This was written before the full unfolding of the national fixation on “terror” or the invasion of Iraq. McSwite is writing about “the current postmodern condition” in which “the only arbiter of social life has become the market” (2002, p. 80). In such circumstances people search for a new “symbolic order” to provide meaning, and McSwite anticipates that
the elusive line between what is good and what is evil, between what is permitted and what is prohibited, will come again into sharper focus, and a “normal” symbolic order will be revitalized and will begin functioning. If this is how it goes, the expense will be great. We will, in effect, create a new “enemy at the gate.” We will find an “other” to serve as our evil so that we can be our good. We will follow the well-worn path of crusades and wars. The tensions among religious ideologies will be tied, even more directly than in the past, to foreign and ecological threats and will exacerbate the new conflicts. (2002, p. 81)

This is remarkable writing. Today, it seems as much like prophesy as scholarly discussion of a possible future. I might be more inclined to interpret the events McSwite describes in terms of critical social theory (one-dimensionality, containment, the warfare state, and so on) and a surplus of regressive thought and action than in terms of the postmodern condition and the symbolic order. However, their conceptual framework has the strength to lead them to this notable conclusion and personal theoretical preference is not really the issue. The issue is use of critical thought to help public service practitioners and academicians reverse some of the damage being caused by regressive thought and action.

The efforts of people who advocate progressive values may appear to some observers as odd, quixotic, or as unacceptable deviations from the accepted, the mainstream. Challenging current conditions is neither easy nor risk-free and it will probably not be of interest to a broad cross-section of people who work in the field of public administration. Nevertheless, given current conditions some people will want to participate in the project of advancing progressive values. It is an important project; Patricia Patterson (2003, p. 240) has asked,

There, at the uncertain edge of certain fascist paradise, what accounts for the apparent perfect confidence of the swirling bird of prey? If we are not to be as certain, how is that confidence countered? If today “the best lack all conviction, and the worst are full of passionate intensity,” which are we, and what are the prospects for refusal born of conviction? (Quoting from W. B. Yeats’ The Second Coming, 1919)

This language is at once enchanting and foreboding. Put in terms of this book, it forms an image of the power and certainty of those who favor regressive values, it wonders whether those who prefer progressive values have sufficient clarity of thought and purpose to counter them, and
it asks whether advocates of progressive values will have the conviction to refuse to accept what is happening around them. Academicians and practitioners in public administration face a variety of constraints and difficulties if they choose to advance progressive values, but if “the best lack all conviction,” then who will take action, and when will they do it?

There is a sentence written by Marcuse in 1965 that I find especially appropriate as an ending for this book. It expresses my sense of the limitations of this sort of work, yet the importance of making the effort. Marcuse wrote:

I admit these are small junctures of theory and practice, but precisely in the grasping of these small junctures, and in the effort not to stop but to go ahead with real independence of thought—I think precisely in this there lies today the only hope for a peaceful and better life. (2001c, p. 93)

There is little any one of us can do to change the basic characteristics of our political and economic surroundings as a whole. However, in our particular corner of society, the study and practice of professional public service, those with a passion for change can make a difference both in how things are done and in how people think about regressive and progressive values.

This is a bottom-up approach that depends on changing people’s attitudes about public affairs rather than waiting for large-scale shifts in political sentiment. At the least, we might think of ourselves as part of an effort to pull out of the current regressive era and move toward a new flowering of progressive values, recognizing that circumstances may at some time turn again toward private interest and regressive values. Or, with changed practices and increased public awareness, we might hope to move the pendulum of regressive and progressive values permanently, a little, toward the progressive end—this would indeed be “making a difference.”
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