

The politics of the politics-administration dichotomy

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INTRODUCTION

In “Politics and administration: On thinking about a complex relationship”, Dwight Waldo, one of the founders of modern public administration thought, wrote: “Nothing is more central in thinking about public administration than the nature and interrelations of politics and administration” (Waldo 1987: 91). For more than a century, scholars of public administration have claimed that administration must be separate from politics in one way or another. The notion of separating politics from administration – often referred to in the literature as the *politics-administration dichotomy* – represents an identity-establishing concept in administrative research and theory, which has been controversial up to this day (Overeem 2009; Rosser and Mavrot 2017). With this controversy in mind, this chapter aims to reconstruct the dichotomy’s conceptual roots, traditional understandings, main lines of criticisms, and to discuss and clarify the contemporary relationship between politics and public administration from a practical perspective. This chapter distinguishes between a normative, an empirical, and an analytical dimension of the dichotomy and claims that the normative and empirical dimensions of this dichotomy cannot be sustained. The dichotomy’s analytical dimension, however, can (and should) be pursued to study the administration as an actor in our complex contemporary political system.

Before dissecting the politics-administration dichotomy, it is worth examining the term, “dichotomy” itself. Rosser and Mavrot (2017: 738) provide a generic definition of the concept stating that the term “dichotomy” is usually used to refer to a distinction between two mutually exclusive and opposed parts. The notion that public administration is somehow excluded from and opposed to politics or policy making has been approached from many different perspectives and in divergent contexts. This is why we can trace a considerable variety of explicit and implicit uses of the politics-administration dichotomy”. The actual term “politics-administration dichotomy” appears less often in continental European public administration than in the Anglo-American discipline where the term has appeared regularly since the 1950s (Svara 1999: 678; Overeem 2009: 14). The variety of uses and understandings of this term on either side of the Atlantic is, of course, related to the different questions, scholarly conjunctures, and historical contexts used by each (Overeem 2005: 316; Overeem 2009: 79, 82; Sager et al. 2018).

The dichotomy denotes a separation *between* state powers or *within* a state power. On the one hand, the separating line may run between the legislative and executive powers of the state. On the other hand, and more commonly, the

dichotomy applies within the executive to distinguish between the level of political control and the level of operational control. In either case, the dichotomy has to do with the division of labor and authority between elected and appointed officials. While elected “politicians” have to determine laws and regulations and ensure political guidance and supervision, the appointed administration must implement the general rules of the law dutifully, competently, and apolitically (Demir and Nyhan 2008). In this context, the legal framework for administrative action is of special importance. The administration only does what it is clearly allowed to do, which is why citizens are protected from arbitrariness. The dichotomy between politics and administration thus entails a moment of difference as well as a moment of comparison. It is important to keep these specific traits of the dichotomy in mind.

The next section highlights the origins of the dichotomy in the history of ideas. Subsequently, we distinguish between the dichotomy’s different epistemological dimensions in normative, empirical, and analytical terms and underpin them using cursory examples from the literature. We thereby illustrate how public administration actually developed around the appreciation and criticism of the politics-administration dichotomy. In conclusion, we argue that neither the normative nor the empirical understanding of the politics-administration dichotomy can be sustained. However, an analytical approach to the politics-administration dichotomy remains fruitful for studying the politics of public administration.

INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS

The conceptual origins of the politics-administration dichotomy stem from the separation-of-powers doctrines of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Rutgers 2001: 4; Van Riper 1984: 214). Fabio Ruggie (2003: 179) explains that “the separation of politics and administration found a long-lasting anchorage in the doctrine about the separation of powers”. The separation-of-powers doctrine stipulates that governmental power should be split into three separate powers – the so called *trias politica* (executive, legislative, judiciary) (Montesquieu 1782; Overeem 2009: 27–29).

According to John Locke (2007 [1690]) and Montesquieu (1782), to name but two of the most famous political philosophers of that time, the *raison d’être* of the state is to protect individual self-determination from external interference. The absence of a common judge endowed with authority, Locke (2007: §19) argued, puts people in the state of nature. Violence without justice, in turn, creates a state of war, regardless of to whom the violence is directed. This state of war cannot please any rational being since the probability of one’s own demise is too great. To leave the state of war, people agree to a social contract and subordinate themselves to the state’s narrowly defined authority (Locke 2007: §95). It follows that the purpose of the state is solely to secure life, liberty, and private property, and that the emergence of state rule is the result of individual utility maximization.

For both Locke and Montesquieu, the separation of powers was the mechanism for rationally limiting monarchical rule. It was envisioned that the governmental powers would each have their distinct realms and would address separate tasks and responsibilities. According to Montesquieu (1782: 38–39), most regents of his time, including their courtiers, selfishly enriched themselves and conducted the affairs of

the state dishonorably. Therefore, a form of government had to be found in which a natural human striving for self-enrichment would be compensated by a balancing force. Montesquieu sought a form of government that would be as independent as possible from moral education and found it in the social division of powers between crown, nobility, and bourgeoisie and based on mutual control of the state powers (Rosser 2017).

For both Locke and Montesquieu, individual freedom could only be guaranteed by limiting governmental rule to the absolute least amount of governmental coercion necessary, as viewed by society. The social consideration mentioned here, however, must be viewed within the political institutions of the time, which allowed for very little democratic participation. However, as precursors of liberalism, the writings of Montesquieu and Locke exerted considerable influence on the constitutional processes of modern democracies such as those of the USA and Switzerland (Lutz 1984). This idea of a (functional and personal) differentiation within the government is what has since become a decisive starting point when thinking about the relationship between politics and administration.

Another important line of thought that became persuasive when thinking about the relationship between politics and administration is that of the “organic state” (Rosser 2017). Metaphors that compare the state to an organism or mechanism have always been used to simplify the complex ideas of political coexistence (Stollberg-Rilinger 1986; Miller 1979). Since antiquity, the most popular and enduring political metaphor has compared the state with the human organism (Peil 1983: 302). The metaphor denotes an evolved, complex, order of interrelated elements whose function in the whole body determines their meaning and relationship to each other.

The comparison between the state and an organism basically includes four features. First, neither the state nor organisms are man-made; they have grown historically. Second, in both cases, the analogy expresses the relationship between the individual parts and the whole organism (Stollberg-Rilinger 1986: 37). Third, the metaphor suggests that the state can be healthy or sick and can usually heal. Finally, both the organism and the state can be characterized as serving a predetermined purpose. Thus, an organic state can be understood as a purposeful association in which individuals are essentially bound together in the common pursuit of a meaningful aim (Spicer 2004; Rosser 2017).

In contrast to Locke and Montesquieu’s rather mechanistic conception of the state (Rosser 2017; Knowles 2002), German state theorists such as Georg W. F. Hegel, Lorenz von Stein, Johann K. Bluntschli as well as their US recipients such as Frank J. Goodnow and Woodrow Wilson argued that the state should not be conceived as a mere machine but rather as an organic body (Sager et al. 2018; Sager and Rosser 2009; Rosser 2013, 2014). These nineteenth-century scholars viewed the state as a self-perpetuating social organism in which political and administrative organs performed their functions in both differentiation and harmony to serve the state in its totality (Knowles 2002; Overeem 2009).

According to the Hegelian teleological notion of history, the emergence of both the rational state and modern bureaucracy were inevitable interdependent steps in the development of world history. It was assumed that “in history the dialectical processes of reason have generated a succession of forms of social life which failed

because they were able to recognize only a contradictory or one-sided conception of human spirit” (Knowles 2002: 18). Each successive historical period corrected the shortcomings of the preceding period. Both individual and collective freedom would ultimately be realized in the perfect social form of the rational state. Given the inseparable development of the rational state with the emergence and development of a formalized bureaucracy, public administration represented a necessary institutional stage on the way to achieve freedom. The bureaucracy would be responsible for protecting individual property and promoting personal welfare while ensuring that the individual pursuit of happiness did not endanger the general welfare (Hegel 1991; Rosser 2010, 2013).

Hegelian organicism is thus related to the state’s dialectic maturation process. The analogy between state and organism suggests that the idea of the state determines the character of its constituent elements and that, consequently, the whole state is more than the sum of its parts. It made little sense to Hegel and his disciples to consider state organs such as the legislature or the executive in isolation from one another. Given that Hegel viewed these organs as serving the same purpose, he advocated for only an inner differentiation of the legislature, the executive, and the “crown”. While the legislature was provided with the power to determine and establish the general rules of the law (Hegel 1991: § 273), Hegel thought of the executive, including the judicial authority and the bureaucracy, as those organs which applied the general legal rules to particular cases. The Hegelian differentiation between (political) law making and (administrative) law implementation was thus a differentiation between the will and the deed of the organic state. The tasks of willing and acting are, in Hegelian terms, the two elementary functions of government (Overeem 2009; Rosser 2013).

There is thus no doubt that public administration is the most important form of governmental organization in Hegelian scholarship. The bureaucratic esprit de corps would ensure that the public officials acted as the guardians and servants of the common will, rather than rulers over that will (Taylor 1975: 433). Moreover, the public administration would represent the mediating body between the monarch and civil society. The public administration ensured good execution of good laws, thereby promoting the welfare of society as an organic whole.

In the early twentieth century, industrialization, modernization, and urbanization led to an unprecedented enlargement of the state apparatus (Overeem 2009: 66–67; Rosser 2013: 1073). The public administration had, in particular, grown considerably in scope and influence and thus became an important state actor. It is therefore not surprising that soon after this occurred the question of the position of the public administration within the state in general and its relationship to politics in particular became a central topic for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars (Overeem 2009: 66–67; Rosser 2013: 1074). By adapting the idea of the *trias politica* and merging it with Hegelian state philosophy, early scholars of public administration on both sides of the Atlantic started to advocate for a differentiation between politics and public administration. Although the term was not yet being used as such, the politics-administration dichotomy was born (Overeem 2005; Rosser 2010, 2013).

Drawing on the idea of the *trias politica* as well as a Hegelian conception of the organic state, early American administrative scholars such as Goodnow and Wilson

also advocated for a differentiation between politics and administration. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, corruption was rampant in the USA due to the spoils system. Civil servants were usually employed because of their personal ties with politicians and captains of industry and not because of their merit (Rosser 2013: 1073). Wilson and Goodnow put forward the idea of a politics-administration dichotomy (Sager et al. 2018: 34). In their view, it was imperative to take “politics out of administration” (Fry 1989: 1036–1037 in Overeem 2005: 316) to safeguard public administrators from corruption and to ensure that the administration could work smoothly (Rosser and Sager 2009: 1138). The primary motive behind drawing a separating line between politics and administration was, in other words, to strengthen the executive or, more generally, the administrative state. It may thus not come as a surprise that Anglo-American administrative scholars tended to advocate for managerial approaches in public administration, emphasizing administrative values such as efficiency, effectiveness, and economy.

The dichotomy was also argued in the opposite direction, namely, to protect democracy from the powerful administrative apparatus. In continental Europe, corruption was less of a problem than in the USA (Rosser 2013: 1073). In post-First World War Germany, for instance, a power vacuum had left politics comparably weak while the public administration had become more influential (Overeem 2009: 73). It was the very strength of the public administration that scholars like Max Weber conceived to be a threat to democracy (Overeem 2005: 316; Rosser and Sager 2009: 1139). Weber (1980 [1922]: 833) famously stated that “the passionate struggle for power – ‘ira et stadium’ – is the politician’s element, whereas the bureaucrat should strive to execute legal orders dutifully, without anger and passion – ‘sine ira et studio’”.

From a history of ideas perspective, numerous liberal scholars were exceedingly skeptical about what they saw as Hegel’s authoritarian views. The Hegelian organic notion of the division of powers was perceived as “anti-liberal since it did not seek control and balance of powers but rather used this as a means of assigning duties. This was also true of the complete maintenance of the monarchical principle” (Stolleis 2001: 101). Weber, who endorsed a mechanical rather than organic notion of the state (Sager and Rosser 2009: 1140), feared that politics was not strong enough to hold public administration in check and that an undemocratic *Beamtenherrschaft* (rule of public administrators) was looming (Overeem 2005: 316; Overeem 2009). It is for these reasons that Weber famously endorsed a politics-administration dichotomy “to keep the administration out of politics” (Sager and Rosser 2009: 1143; Sager and Rosser 2021). In the next section, we distinguish between three dimensions of the dichotomy in the literature, and we discuss their scientific validity for the study of the politics of public administration.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE POLITICS-ADMINISTRATION DICHOTOMY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICS

The debate over the relationship between politics and administration remains intense. From an epistemological perspective, it is possible to derive at least three different meanings of the politics-administration dichotomy from the debate: one normative, one empirical, and one analytical (Rosser 2010: 553; Rosser and Mavrot 2017: 738). Table 3.1 summarizes the three dimensions of meaning and the

arguments in favor and against them. The section then discusses these three dimensions of the dichotomy, their criticisms, and their implication for politics.

The Normative PA-Dichotomy

The *normative* – also called prescriptive – meaning of the dichotomy stipulates that politics and administration *should be* (functionally) separate from each other. Essentially, the normative PA-Dichotomy proposes two different arguments for separating these two entities that are closely linked to the academic debate that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Either, as argued by Goodnow and Wilson, the administration should be insulated from politics to ensure that it can work properly and does not become the plaything of politics. Or, as advocated by Weber, politics should be insulated from administration to guarantee that public policy is made by democratically accountable politicians instead of utility-maximizing bureaucrats (Rosser 2018). The latter normative meaning of the dichotomy underlies the so-called “council manager government”, common in the USA, where a political council defines the policies that are then implemented by an appointed city manager and the subordinate administration (Demir and Nyhan 2008: 83; Schedler and Eicher 2013: 371).

Table 3.1 Three dimensions of the politics-administration (PA) dichotomy

Dimension of dichotomy	Definition of dichotomy	Pro arguments	Contra arguments
The Normative or Prescriptive PA-Dichotomy	Politics and administration <i>should be</i> (functionally) separate from each other	Separation-of-powers doctrine Separation of steering (strategy) from rowing (operation) Protection of democracy from bureaucratic power Protection of administration from party political calculus and ignorance	There is no empirical PA-Dichotomy Administrative action has political consequences Politics is futile without public administration
The Empirical or Descriptive PA-Dichotomy	Politics and administration <i>are in reality</i> (functionally) separate from each other	None, due to the lack of empirical evidence	Administrative action has political consequences Administrative actors have their own values and self-interest Politics depends on public administration for policy making and implementation
The Analytical or Ideal Typical PA-Dichotomy	Politics and administration <i>can be conceived as</i> separate from each other to better grasp reality	An abstract PA-Dichotomy helps scholars to grasp the differences between politics and administration without negating their mutual intertwinement	Renders the concept less important than the normative use or the empirical claim

A similar normative maxim underlies the numerous administrative reforms that took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in, for example, Germany or Switzerland. In the wake of New Public Management and inspired by the organizational form of private stock corporations, scholars/practitioners promoted a division of labor between the political (i.e. elected officials) and operational levels (i.e. appointed administrators) of government to provide for a more efficient production of public services and goods. In this view, the political level, through the parliament, is primarily responsible for law making and legislative oversight, while strategic planning and the monitoring of public service provision are part of the executive's political tasks. On the other hand, the operational level of government is responsible for the concrete implementation of performance and impact targets set by its political superiors. In other words, politics defines the broad administrative goals, budgets the necessary financial resources for their achievement, and subsequently controls the performance of the administration. The latter, equipped with sufficient competencies and resources, enjoys a considerable degree of operational autonomy in public service delivery (Gruening 2001; Thom and Ritz 2017; Rosser 2017).

The reforms inspired by New Public Management had notable consequences for the very identity of public administration and its performance. Whether the reforms resulted in an administration that was more politically controllable or more independent and whether the administration actually became more efficient or more inefficient depends on the context.

While empirical findings remain ambivalent, the normative urge to distinguish between the strategic and operational duties of the state enterprise or, in other words, between politics and administration, remains evident.

However, different scholars of public administration over time have challenged the normative view that a politics-administration dichotomy is essential for a government to function properly. One argument against the dichotomy is that the administration's considerable policy knowledge should not be excluded from politics. The administration should somehow participate in the process of policy making because its expertise could improve the quality of public policy (Waldo 1948). John Gaus (1938: 133), for instance, stated that instead of drawing a dichotomy between government's "knowing, thinking, and planning functions" and "doing functions", public administration ought to perform both policy making and policy implementation. The "principal function of public administration", Gaus (1949: 1036) added, was "to reconcile and to mesh the functions of politicians and the functions of experts in the service of society". In a similar vein, the literature on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1971) suggested that the administration should be granted discretionary freedom to work properly, which would eventually result in the administration's shaping of public policy and in it becoming more political (Overeem 2009: 105).

Another argument against the normative politics-administration dichotomy – especially in the mechanical way Weber envisioned it – was put forward by scholars drawing on the experiences of administration in Nazi Germany during the Second World War (Sager et al. 2018: 61). It was stated that "the dichotomy turns public administration into a mere tool which leads to an administration (like the one in Nazi Germany) that automatically and uncritically executes political decisions with potentially detrimental results" (Overeem 2009: 103). Robert Dahl (1947: 2–3), for

example, held that the concentration camps of “Belsen and Dachau were ‘efficient’ by one scale of values”, but that “the great question of responsibility” is more essential to democracy than “simple efficiency in operation”.

This line of criticism was echoed during the turbulent 1960s when Dwight Waldo hosted a conference on the future of public administration. The exclusively young participants were full of the revolutionary intellectual spirit of the 1960s, which they used to initiate the New Public Administration movement – a movement that was highly normative in itself (Marini 1971). According to these scholars, discrimination, injustice, and inequality were the hot topics to be addressed in both administrative practice and theory. Conservative maxims such as the politics-administration dichotomy had only served to maintain established practice and scholarship that allowed for the status quo of oppression and alienation. Instead, the young scholars argued, public administration was supposed to steer away from the pursuit of efficiency toward more democratic structures of public organizations. Participation and social equality were the buzzwords of New Public Administration (Gruening 2001: 8).

More recently, the Public Value approach (Bozeman 2007; Meynhardt 2008; Stoker 2006) has, more implicitly than explicitly, argued against the normative politics-administration dichotomy. Citizens accept and support public service providers because they create value at the individual and societal levels (Suchman 1995). Accordingly, the addressees of public services should increasingly be involved in the deliberation on the value of public services. High echelon civil servants are responsible for learning about existing values. Like diplomats they are supposed to create impulses for new value discussions and steer a deliberative process, in which as many “stakeholders” as possible agree on a shared notion of the common good (Meynhardt 2008: 466). Public leaders are thus understood to be “leaders of a new type, organically part of the whole system rather than outside it” (Stoker 2006: 52). Obviously, this understanding has little to do with an apolitical administration.

However, the counterargument to this view warns of a threat to democratic legitimacy as the collective deliberation of public values is increasingly transferred to the responsibility of non-elected civil servants at the expense of formal democratic processes. Rhodes and Wanna (2007: 412), for instance, criticize the Public Value approach for its “fundamentally non-democratic notion” of portraying public leaders as “platonic guardians and arbiters of the public interest”. In principle, they argue, it is not the task of the public administration to conduct or even participate in value discussions. This example may reveal how topical the normative debate on the proper relationship between politics and administration has remained (Rosser 2017).

The normative politics-administration dichotomy has not only been criticized and discarded by several public administration scholars; it has also been replaced by alternative concepts entailing normative implications. Scholars such as Jürgen Habermas and James H. Svara argue that the relationship between politics and administration should not be dichotomic but rather reciprocal (Sager 2018: 126). Essentially, these scholars claim that a government can tackle societal problems most successfully, and thus fulfill its purpose, if politics and administration work together, to draw on one another’s respective strengths and values (Sager 2004:

209; Schedler and Eicher 2013: 375–376). The problem with these types of alternative normative models is, especially in the case of Svvara’s (1998, 1999, 2001) notion of complementarity, that they are often so elaborate and complex that their essential meanings are considerably more elusive than the politics-administration dichotomy with its normative, empirical, and analytical dimensions (Overeem 2009: 134).

Criticisms and alternative conceptions notwithstanding, the normative meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy has prevailed until today. Most strikingly, it can be found in our everyday encounters with public administration and politics. Civil servants seem to have a widespread conviction that they should act as a “neutral and competent arm of government” (Demir and Nyhan 2008: 82). Conversely, politicians who claim that administrators should be strictly subordinated to politics hint at the ongoing normative politics-administration dichotomy. The normative representation of the dichotomy also appears at times when reading newspaper statements or political pamphlets wherein the public administration is criticized as too political or excessively bureaucratic. The argument of taking the administration out of politics or politics out of the administration does not seem to have lost too much of its virulence.

The Empirical PA-Dichotomy

The *empirical* – also known as the descriptive – meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy stipulates that politics and administration *are in reality* (functionally) separate from each other or that they are not. In this view, the separation of politics and administration is conceived as an empirically observable and measurable phenomenon (Overeem 2009: 8). This meaning of the dichotomy works on the premise that the division of politics and administration is a social reality that can be captured empirically. As the following cursory examples show, the line between the normative and the empirical politics-administration dichotomy is thin. Generally, it appears that several scholars have attempted to “falsify” the normative dichotomy and its implications for political-administrative practice and theory using empirical evidence.

Demir and Nyhan (2008) attempted to empirically test whether a clear functional division between politics and administration leads to better policy implementation. In other words, the authors aimed to substantiate the normative claim of separating politics from administration. Looking at council manager governments – the very incarnation of the normative politics-administration dichotomy – they could not find sufficient empirical evidence to support the claim (Demir and Nyhan 2008: 93).

What is more, Johnson et al.’s (2020) paper about how a mass casualty event like the recent COVID-19 pandemic can reshape political landscapes endorsed the empirical politics-administration dichotomy. They stated that the specific nature of the government’s crisis response blurred the separation of politics and administration in the USA, thus proposing that the dichotomy is an empirical manifestation that can be grasped (Johnson et al. 2020: 252). However, the empirical meaning of the dichotomy has more often than not been criticized as inaccurate or downright “false” (Long 1954: 22; Waldo 1948: 123). In fact, criticizing the dichotomy using empirical arguments seems to have assisted in the birth of the

Public Policy approach. Fritz Scharpf (1971), for example, called for a review of the conventional normative understanding that seeks to exclude the administration from the policy-making process and to reduce it to a purely instrumental function. Scharpf argued that the sum of all demands on the political-administrative system would considerably exceed the attention and information-processing capacity of the democratic political process. The administration is, Scharpf added, in reality also gathering information, identifying problems, developing alternative courses of action, and initiating decisions, especially in areas where manifest political impulses are unavailable. The mere normative opposition between politics and administration had become unproductive, quite simply, because the administration's participation in the policy-making process was inevitable and "empirically true" (Scharpf 1971: 13). Relevant administrative questions can thus only be reformulated in a frame of reference that transcends the normative dichotomy. This new reference is, according to Scharpf, expected as a result of the further development of the rising Public Policy approach.

In line with Scharpf, modern policy studies, particularly policy network analysis, corroborates the absence of evidence for an empirical politics-administration dichotomy. These studies claim that administrative units or individual public servants pursue policy interests and vocational values (Sager 2007, 2008). Other authors point out that administrators act as brokers in conflictual network constellations (Ingold and Varone 2012).

Similar criticism also comes from the street-level bureaucracy literature (Long 1952; Lipsky 1971; Rohr 1989). The vast body of empirical studies produced by this branch of literature shows that civil servants – instead of neutrally executing political orders – decisively shape public policy because of their influence on the policy formulation process and the policy implementation phase. Some promoters of street-level bureaucracy also provide empirical evidence of how regularly and qualitatively politicians and administrators interact with each other. Nissim Cohen (2021) shows how street-level bureaucrats become policy entrepreneurs when their discretion does not allow them to adapt their provision of policy according to their view of what is right. This finding also suggests that a strict dichotomy between politics and administration is unlikely from an empirical perspective (Overeem 2009: 98).

In sum, there is overwhelming evidence that the politics-administration dichotomy fails the empirical reality check. The only observable dichotomy between politics and administration seems to be the differences in role perceptions between politicians and administrators (Overeem 2009: 100). Civil servants may consider themselves to be neutral policy implementers or as guardians of the state who are at the service of political decisions. However, self-perception does not qualify as empirical observation in political reality. The empirical meaning of the politics-dichotomy must therefore be dismissed as a chimera.

The Analytical PA-Dichotomy

The *analytical* dimension of the politics-administration dichotomy suggests that politics and administration *can be conceived* as separate from each other to provide a better grasp of reality (Rutgers 2001). In other words, the politics-administration dichotomy can be used as an abstract analytical tool in terms of a Weberian ideal

type. By comparing the ideal type with an empirical observation of the relationship between politics and administration in a specific context and then subsequently assessing their closeness or distance based on this observation, it is possible to arrive at an interpretative understanding of the observed reality (Weber 1980 [1922]; Rosser 2018). The ideal-typical perspective helps to define and further narrow the concept of the politics-administration dichotomy. As explained above, the dichotomy then denotes the distinction between the two elementary tasks of government: willing and acting, or law making and law implementation. However, by definition, ideal types do not occur empirically. Neither can they be an empirical example or a normative example. Despite what the term “ideal” may suggest, ideal types are not meant to represent how something should be. Consequently, the analytical meaning of the dichotomy is different from both its empirical and normative meaning.

One public administration scholar who advocates for a purely analytical meaning of the dichotomy is Mark Rutgers (2001). He argues that a dichotomy in its analytical and abstract sense serves an epistemological function because it helps scholars to grasp the differences between the two concepts at hand (Rutgers 2001: 5). Rutgers rejects both the normative and the empirical meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy, stating that researchers need the politics-administration dichotomy “to understand what public administration is” but must not mistake it as empirical reality (Rutgers 2001: 17).

Even though the analytical meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy arguably offers fewer opportunities for attacks, it also does not escape criticism. For Overeem (2009: 141), Rutgers’ attraction to the very lean analytical meaning is what renders the concept less relevant than it used to be. This criticism, however, represents a negligible flaw considering that its analytical use acts as a prerequisite for the invalid normative and empirical uses of the concept. The analytical politics-administration dichotomy does not prevent empirical insights that lead to conclusions that favor a normative or empirical politics-administration dichotomy. The analytical use also does not predetermine such findings or conclusions. This dimension of the dichotomy is therefore the only use of the concept that allows for the empirical mapping of political reality. It provides an analytical framework but does not anticipate actual observations or their normative interpretation. Finally, especially when considering the historical development of the dichotomy, the analytical separation of administration from politics may continue to provide administrative science and its subject – public administration – with an identity in its own right, which can be viewed beyond political science that is based on party-political utility maximization in a state-theoretical frame of reference.

In sum, the analytical politics-administration dichotomy invites new insights into the relationship between politics and administration while the normative dichotomy represents a postulate that violates political reality, and the empirical dichotomy is a claim without evidence.

CONCLUSION

Almost every account in favor or against the politics-administration dichotomy starts with the observation that the topic has been controversial since its original formulation. Nevertheless, to this day, public administration scholars continue to implicitly or explicitly draw on the politics-administration dichotomy in their research.

This has also been true throughout 2020–2021 given that articles on the COVID-19 pandemic refer to and engage with the politics-administration dichotomy (e.g., Johnson et al. 2020; Petridou 2020; Young et al. 2020).

This chapter discusses three different dimensions of the politics-administration dichotomy – one normative, one empirical, and one analytical. We dismiss the normative meaning of the concept for its practical impossibility and for its undesirability: politics cannot work without administration; administration cannot perform without substantive policy decisions. We also dismiss the empirical politics-administration dichotomy because it does not exist. Instead, we agree with Rutgers (2001) in acknowledging the value of the analytical politics-administration dichotomy that allows for an impartial take on political reality and the role public administration plays therein. Empirical findings from studies that adopt this view of the dichotomy provide the basis for both normative and empirical conclusions.

The long debate on the political-administration dichotomy has produced a number of important insights for the political practice of public administration. The debate's most important lesson is that the public administration is a political actor and part of politics. This conclusion requires acknowledging the administration's role as a political actor and the resulting ethical demands for administrative practice. Unlike elected politicians, civil servants draw their legitimacy from their accountability to the whole society rather than to parts of it. Civil servants must interpret their political role as one that is in the service of the common good. Even though civil servants pursue their own self-interests, their self-interest differs from party positions. Vocational expertise can constitute a political belief that acts as a point of reference. If professional standards represent the public administration's self-interests, this self-interest works in the service of the common good. As such, public administration is a part of a complex actor network in which different coalitions compete over the right solution to a given problem. The administration's goal in this setting must be to support a common solution rather than to favor one coalition. If the administration pursues its political role in this manner, the civil servant is in fact a servant of the state.

In a nutshell, public administration must be aware of its role as a political actor and must acknowledge the associated ethical requirements. The democratic legitimation of the public administration occurs through the deliberation of the role the administration plays as part of a balanced system of diverse checks and balances. The integration of various interests via the administration enables creative compromise instead of mere veto positions.

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