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The Politics–Administration Dichotomy

Toward a Constitutional Perspective

Second Edition



Patrick Overeem

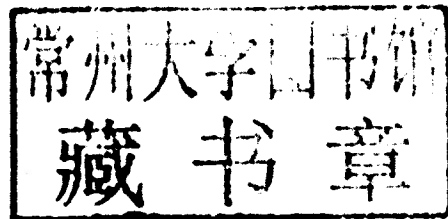


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In respectful remembrance

John A. Rohr (1934–2011)

Preface

Nothing is more central in thinking about public administration than the nature and interrelations of politics and administration. (Waldo 1987: 91)

Readers who expect a reexamination of the politics–administration dichotomy to be little more than an exercise in corpse picking are not entirely mistaken. This study does actually bear some resemblances to a forensic autopsy investigation. In the following pages, I attempt to determine the death of the dichotomy (is it really dead or does it still breathe some life?), to establish its identity (what exactly is this reputedly dead or nearly dead idea?), and to investigate the causes of its present bad condition (has the dichotomy collapsed because of its own internal weaknesses or did it die an ‘unnatural’ or even violent death?). These metaphors should not be taken to indicate some morbid interest on my part; they are just very common in the literature (cf. Campbell and Peters 1998; Levy 2009). Moreover, as can be guessed from my subtitle already, I am not entirely without hopes about the possibility of recovery for the dichotomy. This study even suggests a way to achieve that miracle. It aims to offer a reconstruction in the double sense of the word: a reconstruction of what has happened to the dichotomy and on that basis also a reconstruction of the dichotomy itself. The first, historical aim is subsidiary to the second, theoretical aim. If this attempt at reconstruction is understood in opposition to currently fashionable works of deconstruction, I will not object.

Given the frequent reference to the politics–administration dichotomy in the literature (often routinely at the start of a book or an article), it is remarkable that so far no book-length discussion of the idea has been published. This study tries to fill that gap, as we say, and at the same time to offer a fresh approach to the subject. I think my argument is both conservative and innovative. On the one hand, it espouses what Lord Beveridge once called the ‘Victorian marriage’ view of political-administrative relations (Theakston 2005: 190), thus going against the long-term trend of administrative ‘emancipation.’ On the other, I do not primarily defend the dichotomy on the familiar grounds of aiming either to preserve the democratic quality of politics or to promote the efficiency and effectiveness of administration. Instead, I try to dissociate the dichotomy from the “scientific populism”

that plagues our field (Lawler 1988) and to develop an alternative, constitutionalist approach to the dichotomy, which has respectable credentials but hitherto little articulation.

A work like this draws, of course, on the ideas of many people, but two eminent, now-deceased scholars have been particularly important for this work. The first is Dwight Waldo (1913–2000), whose oeuvre (especially his canonical *The Administrative State*) has been a constant source of delight and inspiration over the years. I have gratefully adopted his approach to study administrative thought from the lens of political philosophy, and I believe that, substantively, my reconceptualization of the politics–administration dichotomy as a constitutional principle follows a path suggested in Waldo’s later writings. Thus, Waldo is omnipresent in this study; he has stimulating things to say in every chapter and on top of them. Second, I have also been deeply inspired by John Rohr, who has just recently ‘exchanged the temporal for the eternal.’ Drawing on his writings and advice, this study is a modest attempt to advance the constitutional approach to public administration that he effectively launched. I hope the remembrance of John Rohr’s remarkable scholarship and personality, will continue to encourage his numerous intellectual heirs to do the same.

Patrick Overeem

Leiden

Acknowledgments

Special thanks must go to Mark Rutgers, my *Doktorvater* in a very real sense of the word. He was the initiator and director of the larger project of which the research for this study was a part. In good times and in bad, he has always confided in me, for which I am deeply grateful. I also thank Sebastiaan Tijsterman for his collegiality and friendship. Next, I salute Jim Svara, admirable sparring partner and occasional opponent. This study testifies in many places of my disagreement with his ideas, but they have been a source of continuous motivation (and occasional frustration) for me. I am glad we have always been on good terms, and I would like to thank him sincerely for the constructive way in which he has discussed these matters with me. Finally, I want to thank David Rosenbloom for being helpful in having this study accepted for publication and my editors at Taylor & Francis, Lara Zoble, Laurie Schlags, and Jim McGovern for their professional guidance of the process.

Editorial Note

This study follows the custom introduced by Dwight Waldo (1968: 443 n. 1; 1971: viii; 1972: 217; 1975: 181 n.) and occasionally adopted by others, to use 'Public Administration' (with capitals) to designate the self-conscious academic field of study, research, and teaching, and 'public administration' (without capitals) to refer to the processes, institutions, and other phenomena in government that are the object of this field of study. (The phrase 'study of Public Administration' then refers to the meta-study of the academic field itself.) Waldo already recognized that the distinction is sometimes hard to draw, but in large part the difficulty seems to be a peculiarity of the English language, as corresponding distinctions in other languages (e.g., those between *Verwaltungswissenschaft* and *öffentliche Verwaltung* in German or *bestuurskunde* and *openbaar bestuur* in Dutch) are usually not very problematic. In cases of doubt and ambiguity, I have omitted capitalization. Names of other academic fields (Law, Political Science) are also capitalized for the sake of consistency. It should be noted that in quotations these conventions are often not followed.

The Author

Patrick Overeem is an assistant professor at the Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, the Netherlands, where he has studied both political science and public administration. In January 2010, he defended an earlier version of the present study as a doctoral dissertation. His areas of specialization are political philosophy, administrative ethics, political-administrative relations, and constitutionalism. Specific recent interests include virtue ethics (especially MacIntyre's) and administrative statesmanship. He has published articles in *Public Administration Review*, *Administration & Society*, and *Administrative Theory & Praxis*.

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Chapter 1

A Quandary

It appears that we can neither accept the politics-administration formula nor get along without it. (Waldo 1982: IX, 6)*

1.1 The Standard Account

Phrased in everyday language, this study is about the question whether we can and should make a division within government between something called *politics* and something else called (*public*) *administration*.† To most people outside the academic field of Public Administration, this question will not seem particularly troubling. They just suppose, even without firsthand knowledge, that ‘doing politics’ is not the same as ‘doing administration,’ that being a politician differs from being a public servant, and that for some reason this should be so. They find the idea quite obvious and normally give it little thought. If asked, most people could probably mention some differences between politics and administration, but in general they will have only a vague idea of where exactly the boundary line runs and an even vaguer idea of the reasons for its existence. The separation between

* Because this unpublished source restarts page numbering in each chapter, a Roman chapter number is included in the reference.

† Discussions of the politics–administration dichotomy ordinarily limit ‘administration’ to ‘public administration.’ I do the same, taking ‘government’ as the traditional and still suitable domain to think about the dichotomy (cf. Raadschelders 2003). For a discussion of the alternative concept of ‘governance,’ see Chapter 5, Section 5.5.

politics and administration simply exists as an established if little understood feature of contemporary government.

If this is true of common citizens, who may not have a very accurate knowledge of the workings and principles of modern government, it seems hardly less true of informed and engaged professionals such as journalists, lobbyist, judges, or indeed most politicians and administrators themselves. Surely, these insiders know very well that not all politicians obtain their positions directly through democratic elections, and that administrators do not implement ready-made policies like automata—they know that in fact none of the commonly used distinctions between politics and administration are absolutely watertight. Still, they usually speak and act upon the assumption that differentiating between politics and administration is both possible and sensible. Even many students of modern government from academic fields other than Public Administration, such as Political Science and Law, do not seem to regard the division as particularly problematic. They may be more aware of its subtleties and be able to relate the issue to other characteristics of modern government, but as a rule they write little about the division itself and even less about its *raison d'être*. They just seem to take it as a given. Thus, for most practitioners and academics, as for most other people, the idea of a separation between politics and administration appears quite unproblematic.

Not so for most students of public administration. They almost unanimously reject what they call 'the politics–administration dichotomy.' In their view, readily observable differences between politicians and administrators (for instance, the fact that the former usually try to make themselves known to the general public, while the latter normally try to stay anonymous) do not justify a distinction between the more abstract concepts of politics and administration at all, let alone (the idea of) a separation between them in practice. This dismissal of the dichotomy by students of public administration can be surprisingly vehement. In the literature, the dichotomy is depicted as an "aberration" and a "myth" (Svara 1998, 2001), even as a "ghost" to be exorcised (Maynard-Moody 1998). Others speak about "the now-dated and overly simplistic politics–administration dichotomy" (MacDonald 2007: 721) or they simply declare—with a slight but significant change of phrasing that will be discussed later—that "the policy-administration dichotomy is bunkum" (Murray and Banovetz 1993). So, we face a situation in which an academic minority emphatically rejects an idea commonly if unreflectively held by most other people. As John Rohr has put it: "Every student of Public Administration denies the possibility of making a distinction between politics and administration; but everyone else continues to make that distinction" (1986: 183). Although this is, as Marini has remarked, "an exaggeration on both scores" (1994: 3), a remarkable divergence between the two groups is undeniable.

The dismissal of the dichotomy by students of public administration is not a matter of thoughtless prejudice. Whereas others, including most political scientists and lawyers, leave the relationship between politics and administration uninvestigated, students of public administration have a long tradition of pondering the

subject. They back their position by at least half a century of theoretical reflection and empirical research. They have often either studied the matter themselves or are acquainted with the work of others who have done so. Indeed, a great deal of initiation in the field of Public Administration consists in learning the flaws of the politics–administration dichotomy: “Presumably, even the beginning student in Public Administration knows that there was once something called the politics–administration dichotomy, which has now been discarded” (Waldo 1980: 67).

In the Public Administration literature, the relationship between politicians and administrators in general and the politics–administration dichotomy in particular are objects of much attention. A consultation of reference works testifies to the importance of the subject in the field. In an analysis of American and European textbooks, for instance, Rutgers has found that “politics and administration (in general)” are among the most widely covered themes (1993: 125; cf. Rutgers 1998: 21–27). The *Public Administration Theory Primer*, a more recent textbook, discusses “political control on the bureaucracy” and “bureaucratic politics” as the first two topics in its overview of administrative theory (Frederickson and Smith 2003). Similarly, in one *Handbook of Public Administration* (there are several), the first place in a discussion of “five great issues in organization theory” is occupied by “politics and administration” and the second place by “bureaucracy and democracy” (Denhardt and Baker 2007: 121–129).^{*} Finally, in many if not most Public Administration encyclopedias, lexicons, and dictionaries “politics–administration dichotomy” appears as a lemma (e.g., Bhatta 2006: 475; Chandler and Plano 1988: 98–99; MacDonald 2007; Seitz 2003; Shafritz 1985: 415; Shafritz, Hyde, and Parkes 2004: 226–227; Van Hook 1998).

Sources like these offer what we can call the standard account of the politics–administration dichotomy. According to this account, the dichotomy was introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly by Woodrow Wilson’s essay ‘The Study of Administration’ (1887), after which other classical formulations were offered in the writings of Frank Goodnow and Max Weber, particularly. In the two or three decades preceding the Second World War, still according to the standard account, the dichotomy was uncritically accepted as part of what later became known as Public Administration’s ‘orthodoxy,’ but in the late 1930s and 1940s, an increasing amount of criticism arose and the dichotomy was decisively proven inadequate. Since then, the idea has perhaps not entirely disappeared, but it certainly has widely (and rightly) been abandoned.

^{*} In earlier editions of the same handbook, ‘the politics–administration dichotomy’ also occupied the first place in a list of “five great issues in the profession of public administration” (Fry 1989: 1028–1039), but in the third edition, the text has been reworked from a ‘post-traditional’ or postmodern perspective which grants the dichotomy only a brief treatment (Farmer 2007: 1206–1208).

This standard account can be told in greater or smaller detail, and every bit of it has been disputed by scholarly experts, but this study is not a straightforward attempt to reject it as false. In fact, I will argue (especially in Chapters 3 and 4) that it contains more truth than some recent Public Administration historiographers have tried to make us believe. In my view, the standard account tells an abridged rather than a misleading version of the story; it needs expansion rather than correction. What it certainly has got right is that the dichotomy has been widely abandoned by students of public administration. Notwithstanding much skepticism about the degree of progress in the social sciences, the abandonment of the politics–administration dichotomy is generally seen as a real advancement. Only a small number of dissidents have objected to the general iconoclasm. They have noted that, despite its “thousand deaths,” the dichotomy continues to be resurrected (Rutgers 1998: 23), and they have endeavored to defend the dichotomy against what they believe to be invalid or disproportional criticism (Montjoy and Watson 1995; Overeem 2005 and 2006; Stene 1975b). These tactics are, however, mostly defensive; truly positive accounts of the dichotomy are rare. Overall, the demise of the dichotomy has been little lamented. Moe’s assertion that “[m]odern public administration emerged out of a spirited rejection of the politics–administration dichotomy” (1994: 18) is certainly not exaggerated.

1.2 Waldo’s Challenge

To a considerable extent, the formulation and dissemination of the standard account has been the work of Public Administration theorist and historiographer Dwight Waldo. His oeuvre offers a particularly good entrance to the subject, if only because he treats it as of paramount importance:

Nothing is more central in thinking about public administration than the nature and interrelations of *politics* and *administration*. Nor are the nature and interrelations of politics and administration matters only for academic theorizing. What is more important in the day-to-day, year-to-year, decade-to-decade operation of government than the ways in which politics and administration are conceptualized, rationalized, and related one to the other? (1987: 91)

Waldo particularly contributed to the development of the standard account of the dichotomy as a historiographer. He was not a detached spectator, however, but played an active role in the mid-twentieth century dismissal of the dichotomy himself. Particularly in his first and most influential book, *The Administrative State* (1948), he depicted and rejected the dichotomy as a deeply flawed idea, asserting that “either as a description of the facts or a scheme of reform, any simple division into politics-and-administration is inadequate” (1948: 128; cf. pp. 207–208).