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**The politics-administration dichotomy : a reconstruction**  
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“That we are the beneficiaries as well as the victims of the cleft between politics and administration is recognized. The cleft gives room for maneuver. Its tensions, lapses, confusions, and contradictions can and do sometimes serve ends we value. Arguably, indeed, some of the ends we value have been created by the existence of the cleft.” (Waldo 1990: 82)

### 7.1 THE ‘PERDURABILITY’ OF THE DICHOTOMY

The politics-administration dichotomy is a social construct. It is not given by nature or logic, although it can appear quite natural and logical in some of its conceptualizations, and we have no warrant that it might not pass into disuse and disappear. The dichotomy is not universal either. The existence of a division between political and administrative functions and functionaries seems typical of modern constitutional governments only and alien to earlier and other forms of government. The very idea was absent or at least unarticulated in pre-modern and early modern thought, and it is presently (allegedly) transcended or deconstructed in post-modern thought. At the same time the dichotomy is not an arbitrary artificiality that we can easily dispose of. Through a long historical development it has become embedded in our Western way of thinking about government. Closely related to the separation-of-powers doctrine, it adds a new chapter to the continuing story of constitutional thinking. Especially during the twentieth century the dichotomy has been codified in laws and regulations, upheld by court rulings, internalized by public officials, and presupposed in much scholarly work. It has become ingrained in our understanding and structure of government and is not likely to disappear any time soon.<sup>1</sup>

A good way to characterize the politics-administration dichotomy is to follow current fashions in Public Administration and Political Science and call it an institution. It is a particular kind of institution, however, namely a constitutional

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Merry notes that the comparable though more specific “boundary” between the presidency and public administration is “neither official nor systematic, but it is substantial and persistent” (1978: i; cf. pp. 47, 71).

principle. Such institutions are typically not the main focus of today's neo-institutionalism, which arose in the 1980s and has since become the dominant approach in both fields. To be sure, different kinds of neo-institutionalism can be distinguished, each putting its own emphases on different types and aspects of institutions, but in general they pay most attention to relatively specific and often informal institutions such as decision-rules, social norms, routines, and conventions.<sup>2</sup> This was different in classical institutionalism, which was dominant in Political Science and to a smaller extent Public Administration until the rise of behavioralism in the 1950s and 1960s. Peters has offered a useful description of this "old institutionalism" in terms of five characteristics (2005: 3-11). The first three of them (legalism, structuralism, and holism, in his terms) basically say that the old institutionalism concentrated on constitutional structures. Authors like Carl J. Friedrich (e.g., 1968 and 1974) discussed the merits of, for instance, presidential and parliamentary democracy, federalism, bicameralism, and the rule of law on a relatively high level of generality. They were interested in the principles of government rather than its precise workings. Peters' last two characteristics of the old institutionalism (its historical and normative emphases) point to the fact that the approach was still firmly rooted in political philosophy. Whatever the merits and demerits of classical institutionalism in general, this brief characterization may suffice to show that it provides a promising theoretical background for a constitutional understanding of the politics-administration dichotomy. The fact that today the dichotomy is seldom recognized as a relevant institution, let alone as a constitutional principle, can be understood from the demise of classical institutionalism and the predominance of behaviorist and neo-institutionalist orientations in the field (cf. Vile 1998).

That the politics-administration dichotomy is indeed a deeply ingrained institution in our thinking is shown by its remarkable persistence in the face of widespread and often vehement criticism. Public administration scholars have been surprised by "the perdurability of the politics-administration dichotomy" (Waldo 1984b) and "the lingering influence of politics-administration" (Denhardt 2007: 47). Speaking about "the ancient proverb of public life that politics and administration are separate enterprises," Peters has observed that "[a]lthough any number of authors have attempted to lay this proverb to rest, it has displayed amazing powers of survival and reappears in any number of settings in any number of political systems" (2001: 182). Many explanations have been offered for the

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<sup>2</sup> Svava has associated the difference between the dichotomy model and his own complementarity model with contemporary debates between rational-choice and sociological variants of neo-institutionalism (2001: 179; Svava and Brunet 2003: 190). This parallel is less than helpful, however. As this study has shown, the dichotomy can well be understood from many more perspectives than rational-choice.

persistence of the dichotomy.<sup>3</sup> One type of explanation refers to characteristics of the construct itself. Waldo has suggested that the dichotomy may be so tough simply because dichotomies in general are basic to human thinking: “I have speculated that dichotomies or paired opposites have a base in the biology of the brain, given their prominence in our thought ways” (1987: 111 n.18).<sup>4</sup> Others have explained the endurance of the dichotomy from what they see as its simple and rational character (Hansen and Ejersbo 2002: 734-735). These suggestions may have some merit, but they are not sufficient to explain the persistence of this particular dichotomy, because dichotomies can and do of course also fall into oblivion despite, or perhaps rather because of, their simplicity and rationality. In the case of the politics-administration dichotomy something more seems to be the matter. Its durability does not seem to be caused by its simplicity, but rather by its complexity. It is a many-sided construct that cannot easily be discarded, perhaps a many-headed monster that cannot easily be slain. When one understanding of the dichotomy is rejected, such as deciding/executing or value/fact, other possible conceptualizations remain unaffected.

A more sophisticated explanation of the dichotomy’s persistence refers not just to characteristics of the dichotomy itself, but to its function for those who use it. A common argument is that while the dichotomy itself must be regarded as untenable, it remains in use because it serves the interests of certain involved actors, who keep it alive as a “useful” or “salutary” myth (Miller 2000: 314; Lawler 1988: 51; Richardson 1997: 41). Public servants in particular are often said to profit from maintaining the dichotomy. According to Peters, for instance, the dichotomy allows bureaucrats to hide behind their “apparent professional detachment” so that they “may make otherwise unacceptable decisions more palatable to the public” (2001: 182). The same idea is expressed by Cook: “The perpetuation of the dichotomy means the perpetuation of the contradiction between what the public is told about the role of public administration and what they can readily see of its influence on the shape and substance of the polity” (1996: 97; cf. Miller 2000: 325). Alternatively, the dichotomy is sometimes also said to serve as a useful myth for politicians. According to Peters again,

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<sup>3</sup> Skelley has given a useful and extensive analysis of the reasons for the persistence of the dichotomy. As an additional explanation of his own he suggests that “the dichotomy’s persistence may have its foundation in the nature of the decision-making processes of large bureaucratic organizations” (2008: 549). In particular, he points to the hierarchical structure and divisions of labor in many organizations. This seems an attractive explanation, but treating the politics-administration dichotomy only as a management principle of public organizations overlooks its (historically, theoretically and practically more important) constitutional rationale.

<sup>4</sup> In general, the use of dichotomies was a typical trait of Waldo’s way of thinking (Carroll and Frederickson 2001: 2, 5; McCurdy and Rosenbloom 2006: 203-204).

“it may allow politics to shape, or at least influence, an important decision that will be announced by a ‘non-political’ institution that will not be held publicly accountable” (2001: 182). Thus, in the power game between politicians and public servants, the dichotomy may serve as a rhetorical tool or hiding cloak to either party – or indeed (a possibility that is little noticed) to both parties simultaneously.

In an even subtler attempt to explain the dichotomy’s endurance the ‘useful myth thesis’ is not applied to practitioners but to academics. According to this argument, scholars continue to take the dichotomy seriously not because they see any value in the idea itself, but because it suits their own interests, for instance because its simplicity makes it useful for Public Administration ‘pedagogy’ (Rugge 2003). They find it attractive to start a course or textbook on public management, administrative ethics, or another subject in Public Administration with the “creation myth” (Svara 1999: 676) that in the beginnings of the field of Public Administration simplistic dichotomy was advocated but that gradually we have come to know better. This way of presenting the history of the field is not only easy, but also reassuring, because it gives the impression that at least on one point real progress has been made – a comforting idea in a field struggling with a self-imposed identity crisis. Hence, Harmon has suggested that the continuation of controversies about the dichotomy can be explained from the “status anxiety” of administrative theorists suffering from “their field’s repressed authority problem”: the endless debates on this seemingly fundamental “pseudo-problem” makes the field look relevant and serious (2006: 39, 137). Whether applied to academics or to practitioners, in each of these variants the basic idea is that the politics-administration dichotomy does not go away because it functions as a useful myth: “For all three groups (elected officers, appointed administrators, and political scientists) the policy-administration dichotomy is a convenient crutch, or myth, to support and justify their current status” (Mosher 1982: 8).

I do not deny that in all probability these explanations for the dichotomy’s persistence carry some truth. Undoubtedly many civil servants and politicians will attempt to hide behind the shield of the dichotomy when it suits them and in Public Administration textbooks and undergraduate courses a condescending reference to Wilson’s and Goodnow’s ‘simplistic’ idea does indeed seem to belong to the established opening ritual. But even if not entirely false, these explanations are not unproblematic either. An obvious problem of the ‘useful myth thesis’ is that it has never been supported by empirical studies, but only by assertions and anecdotes. Perhaps the thesis cannot be falsified or corroborated. The existence of hidden motives is difficult if not impossible to prove, and those who try to do so may themselves be suspected of hidden motives and ‘status anxiety’ in turn. A more fundamental problem of the thesis is that it assumes what most of its

adherents tend to deny, namely that the dichotomy has a strong normative appeal, at least for citizens and practitioners. If it had not, it could not function as a very effective smoke screen. This normative appeal requires an explanation the useful myth thesis itself cannot offer. Most importantly, however, these explanations for the persistence of the politics-administration dichotomy seem overly cynical. They assume that the dichotomy is at bottom an indefensible idea, so that its endorsement must be either unintelligent or insincere, making the concept a 'noble lie' at best (Marion 1990). This ignores the possibility that there may be good though unrecognized reasons to stick to the dichotomy, and illustrates once again that many authors have lost sight of the problem the dichotomy was initially meant to solve. Therefore, it is important to return to this problem and to acknowledge with Waldo that "the politics-administration distinction (...) cannot or at least should not be wholly abandoned. The distinction serves many useful purposes in analyzing and operating the government" (in Brown and Stillman 1986: 47).

The complexity and enduring value of the dichotomy take us back to the central question formulated in Chapter One: *What is the meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy?* In this chapter I will take stock of the different meanings encountered in this study and try to clarify how my own understanding of the dichotomy as a constitutional principle sits among them. The following sections subsequently discuss how the dichotomy can and should be conceptualized (*content*; 7.2), what it can and should be intended to accomplish (*purpose*; 7.3), and finally the reasons for which it can and should be endorsed (*relevance*; 7.4). In the final section (7.5) I return to the opening observation of this study that while the dichotomy is rejected by most students of public administration, it is accepted by most others, and try to see whether, at least on this topic, social science and common sense can be brought in harmony.

## 7.2 CONTENT: A LAYERED CONSTRUCT

If this study underlines one thing, it is the importance of conceptualizations. Svava was right when he argued that "the heart of the problem in understanding the relationship between politics and administration has been our inability to conceptualize it" (1985: 4). Conceptualizations are fundamental: obviously the dichotomy is more useful and therefore more relevant in some conceptualizations than in others. The main message of this study is therefore that, again in Svava's words, rejecting the dichotomy "is not necessary if the dichotomy is properly understood" (2002: 5). Much too often, the sense and especially the

nonsense of the politics-administration dichotomy are proclaimed without a proper consideration of what the notion exactly means. Of course, providing a defensible conceptualization is not easy. As this study has shown, the dichotomy has a kaleidoscopic character: it can be seen from different viewpoints, each of which shows different, sometimes contrasting aspects. Waldo already noticed in *The Administrative State* that “even though two writers may both accept the politics-administration formula as true, they may be completely at variance as to its meaning in practice” (1948: 115). In a similar vein, Rutgers has observed that “[d]epending on the approach taken, [the dichotomy] can be assigned different characteristics that may lead to its acceptance or rejection: the domain of applicability of the dichotomy seems to change constantly” (1998: 25). To unravel this sometimes mind-boggling diversity of conceptualizations I will now first examine the distinction between politics and administration, and then the dichotomous relationship between them. For both the implications of treating the dichotomy as a constitutional principle will be assessed in particular.

A first crucial step to reduce confusion is to break the conceptual chain of ‘administration-policy-politics’ that was forged in the 1930s and 1940s by heterodox authors such as Gulick and Appleby (section 4.2). Its first link, the equation of administration and policy, in part reflects an empirical development. Since the first articulation of the dichotomy in the nineteenth century the policy role of public administrators has strongly expanded. The emphasis of much public administration work (as of much other work in modern industries) has shifted from doing to thinking, from policy execution to policy preparation, including – spectacularly but not exclusively – the drafting of legislation. This development has made the instrumentalist conceptualization of politics/administration as deciding/executing even more inadequate than it had already been before. It is therefore understandable that the growing involvement of administrators in policy-making has often been invoked as an objection against the dichotomy. In itself, however, this development need not imply a rapprochement between politics and administration. Students of public administration often tend to forget that while public administrators have got a larger policy role during the twentieth century, politicians have greatly expanded their electioneering, campaigning, and spin-doctoring activities as well. Moreover, as we have seen, the concept of administrative discretion has played an important but not always appropriate role in forging the administration-policy equation. Properly understood, discretion rather presupposes a distinction between administration and policy, because it implies the free operation of administration within a certain policy framework (see section 4.5).

With regard to the second link of the conceptual chain it is crucial to reinstate the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘policy’ (cf. Overeem 2005: 320-322). After politics/administration and policy/administration were thrown together in the heterodox literature, they have been intermingled ever since. Only a handful of administrative theorists has tried to break this conceptual link as well. Among them, Frank Marini is particularly outspoken:

“Part of the difficulty with the usual position on the politics administration dichotomy is that it moves carelessly between arguments about the possibility of distinguishing between policy and administration and the possibility of distinguishing between politics and administration. There are languages in which it is impossible to distinguish between the concepts ‘politics’ and ‘policy,’ but contemporary American English is not such a language. Yet too often public administration arguments move from an argument that it is difficult to administer policy without impacting policy to the argument that it is impossible in an intellectually respectable fashion to distinguish between politics and administration” (1994: 3).<sup>5</sup>

Although others, such as Stene (1975b), have also emphatically and intelligently insisted upon the distinction between the concepts of politics and policy, their pleas have unfortunately been of little avail. Indeed, some attempts to put things straight have introduced new confusions, for instance when Thayer defines politics as “the theory and practice of winning elections” and policy as “what winners do while in office” (1984: 264), when Montjoy and Watson describe policy/administration as a “conceptual” dichotomy and politics/administration as an “institutional” one (1995: 232), or when Harmon conceptualizes politics/administration as expressing/executing and policy/administration as general/particular (2006: 124-126). These interpretations all specify and simplify the issue unjustifiably.

Part of the difficulty of gaining more clarity about the difference between ‘politics’ and ‘policy’ is that, as Rohr has noted, “the relationship between the two concepts is one of whole to part. That is all public policy is political but not all politics is policy. Electoral politics is the most obvious example of political activity frequently unrelated to policy” (1989: 55 n.44).<sup>6</sup> Following this view, we

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<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, and more surprisingly, Thayer has argued that acknowledging the distinction between politics and policy is not only a matter of conceptual clarity, but also of honesty towards public administrators about their constitutional responsibility: “Careerists deserve a respite from academic badgering. Their jobs can be, and often are, challenging and exciting, but it is unfair to suggest that because their instrumental value decisions can be casually described as ‘making policy,’ they should assert that they do what they are not constitutionally entitled to do (i.e., perform the same function as those elected to direct them)” (1984: 269-270).

<sup>6</sup> Harmon makes the same point when he says that “[p]olicy (...) is properly regarded as a limited feature (...) of politics” and that “politics is a more protean concept” (2006: 7-8, 124-126).

end up with the distinction Rosenbloom made between “two relatively distinct types of politics,” namely “partisan politics” and “policy politics” (1984: 104 and 2008; cf. Overeem 2005: 321-322).<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, “the boundaries between policy and party politics are hazy” (Etzioni-Halevy 1983: 98), but it is necessary to maintain the distinction. Indeed, I would argue that because of its normative value doing so becomes more necessary as it becomes more difficult.

Of course, not all difficulties of conceptualizing the dichotomy are caused by the concept of policy. The politics/administration distinction itself is also vexingly “multidimensional” (Hansen and Ejersbo 2002: 749). Politics and administration are complex phenomena denoted by complex concepts, and the distinction between them can be understood in many different ways, such as general/particular, deciding/executing, generalist/specialist, elected/appointed, democracy/bureaucracy, and partisan/neutral, to name only some of the most prominent. These conceptualizations all contribute to our understanding of politics/administration (although surely not in equal measure), and therefore we should not dismiss particular conceptualizations too easily. Indeed, as Waldo has argued, something can be said even for deciding/executing, which is definitely the most criticized conceptualization in the literature: “The twofold schema has too much going for it in logic and usefulness simply to disappear. We *do*, commonsensically, decide and execute, set policy and administer” (in Brown and Stillman 1986: 153; cf. 1980: 69; 1984b: 232). Thayer, though radically critical of the dichotomy as such, has acknowledged the same: “Nothing is more common than the everyday distinction between those who make policy and those who implement it” (1984: 269). Thus, even deciding/executing, although clearly insufficient to serve as an understanding of politics/administration on its own, can be useful as a starting point.

If we should we not dismiss particular conceptualizations lightly, far less should we reduce politics/administration to one single conceptualization or a small set of conceptualizations. In Chapters Four and Five it was shown how such conceptual reductions (for instance to value/fact) have led to misguided criticisms of and unhelpful alternatives to the dichotomy. To take another example, the partisan/neutral contrast is certainly helpful to understand politics/administration: administrators are generally and rightly expected to be less partisan or more neutral than politicians (cf. Overeem 2005). Yet party political neutrality cannot be a sufficiently distinguishing attribute of public administration as long as there are other institutions in government that are also non-partisan, or at least expected to be so (for instance the judiciary, or the monarchy if there

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<sup>7</sup> In section 4.2 we have seen that some of the heterodox authors continued to make the same distinction (Gulick 1933: 59-60; Appleby 1949: 53, 153; cf. Fry 1989: 1034).

is one) and as long as there are also highly partisan public administrators (for instance in dictatorial regimes). Thus, the partisan/neutral distinction is important, but politics/administration cannot be reduced to it. The same goes for other distinctions. No single conceptualization or small selection of conceptualizations seems capable of capturing the full meaning of politics/administration. Instead of simplifying politics/administration by dismissing unattractive conceptualizations or overrating attractive ones (let alone introducing ever new ones), it seems more sensible to give up on Waldo's quest for one simple "formula" and to accept politics/administration, complex as it is, as a meaningful distinction itself.

A more commendable way to reduce complexity, and at the same time doing justice to it, I would suggest, is to understand the politics/administration distinction as a layered construct with different conceptualizations pertaining to different levels of generality, for instance as deciding/executing on the micro-level of functions performed by individual officials, as political/professional accountability on the meso-level of organizational design, as legislative/executive on the macro-level of national constitutional structure, and as civic culture/imperial traditions on perhaps the most general level of Western civilization.<sup>8</sup> Unconscious switching between these different levels is a major source of confusion in debates about the dichotomy. Conceptualizing politics/administration as a layered structure reveals why criticisms aimed at one level often do not affect the distinction at other levels.

Within this layered structure, conceptualizations at lower levels of generality (especially those at the level of individual functionaries or issues) tend to be more vulnerable to theoretical and empirical objections than those at higher levels. In particular if the dichotomy is to be understood as a constitutional principle, politics/administration must be conceptualized on a relatively high level of generality. The doctrine of the separation of powers, or that of the separation of church and state, also do not prescribe the relations and interactions between government powers or between government and religious groups in detail, but allow these to be specified in laws, regulations, and other (sometimes unwritten) norms. The situation of the politics-administration dichotomy is no different: it gives a general principle, not a detailed rule-book. In Waldo's oeuvre, we see a fascinating shift towards increasingly general conceptualizations of politics/administration (cf. Overeem 2008a). In his early writings, he conceptualized the

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<sup>8</sup> This idea is derived from Waldo, who identified the issue of the "definition of the unit" as an important problem in thinking about the dichotomy: "What is the appropriate population or universe for calculating the optimum mix of democracy and administration?" (1977: 10). In his answer, he suggested individual organizations, clusters of related organizations, the nation state, and finally even the entire world, recognizing that each level depends upon the other levels (1977: 10-11). Implicitly and explicitly throughout his work, however, Waldo showed a clear preference for the national state as the most appropriate level (1977: 10; cf. 1981: 3).

distinction mainly by means of the relatively narrow understanding of deciding/executing and rejected it as such, but his later writings show increasingly more general conceptualizations and therefore also a greater appreciation of the distinction. Democracy/bureaucracy in particular became the most prominent conceptualization in his later work (e.g., Waldo 1977).

The relation between democracy/bureaucracy and politics/administration is not evident. On the one hand, politics/administration cannot and should not be reduced to democracy/bureaucracy only, because it is possible to conceptualize the former without the latter: one could imagine a dichotomy between aristocratic politics and feudal administration.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the politics-administration dichotomy originated in a time when politics became increasingly democratic and administration increasingly bureaucratic, and since Weber democracy/bureaucracy has often been adopted in the literature (e.g., Hyneman 1950; Etzioni-Halevy 1983). Compared to other conceptualizations, democracy/bureaucracy is certainly a very important and comprehensive one and it is particularly suited for contrasting those particular forms of politics and administration that continue to dominate the theory and practice in modern Western government. Had democracy/bureaucracy been taken as the focal distinction rather than deciding/executing, the long-standing debate about the dichotomy would certainly have been much more fruitful.

Having examined the politics/administration *distinction*, we can now turn to the other element and see what it means to say that there is a *dichotomy* between politics and administration. I have no difficulty admitting that ‘dichotomy’ is after all an unfortunate term that has caused many misunderstandings in the literature.<sup>10</sup> It is of course a strong term, and one should not suggest that as long as there is no ‘pure hybrid’ there is already a dichotomy between politics and administration. A mere distinction and minor differences seem not sufficient to speak of a dichotomy. Conversely, there is no need to reserve the term ‘dichotomy’ for

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<sup>9</sup> Specifically, it would be misguided to reduce the distinction between politics and administration to the distinction between elected and appointed, so that “politics is what is done by politicians, that is people elected to office in certain conditions; and administration is done by appointed people” (Schaffer 1973: 111). The relation between these two distinctions seems rather the reverse: elected/appointed is dependent on the prior distinction between politics and administration rather than vice versa.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Harmon’s definition: “*Dichotomy* not only connotes an analytical distinction between one element and another but also packs the added punch of suggesting that the distinction between the two elements is especially clear cut, or ‘radical,’ and even that their relation is contradictory or antagonistic” (2006: 20-21). This definition combines three elements, namely (1) analytical distinction, (2) being clear cut or radical, and (3) contradiction or antagonism. While the first element makes the concept too thin (the dichotomy is not only an analytical distinction but also a separation in practice), the second and the third threaten to make it too thick (the dichotomy need not be very clear-cut and antagonistic).

absolute and impenetrable separations only. Stene has rightly chastened critics of the dichotomy who “tend to accept the idea that if two concepts cannot be clearly distinguished, they are identical” (1975b: 83). The demand of absolute demarcation is unworkable, he adds, because “there is always a gray area”. The inevitable overlap should not deter us from endorsing the politics-administration dichotomy. In a passage that nicely captures my general argument, he says:

“[O]ur inability to distinguish sharply between politics and administration, or between policy-making and policy-implementation, or even ‘the intermingling of policy and administration,’ does not mean that a dichotomy cannot be propounded for purposes of justifying a distinction of roles or for promoting institutional change. The fact that some advocates carried the distinction beyond its original intent does not justify a complete rejection; nor are the most vocal critics of the dichotomy any more realistic than the purists at the other extreme” (1975b: 85-86).

Thus, an overly strict as well as an overly elastic usage of ‘dichotomy’ threatens to rob the term of its practical utility. The phrase ‘politics-administration dichotomy’ need not be taken too literally; its use is comparable to that of ‘separation of powers’ and ‘separation between church and state’ – standard expressions which do not imply watertight demarcations either. But this is largely a matter of terminology. In this study I have been concerned not so much with terminology as with conceptualizations. In fact, as I have written elsewhere (2006: 140), I am not half as concerned about preserving the term ‘dichotomy’ as some are about abolishing it. Alternative terms such as non-interference, insulation, separation, demarcation, distance, or disentanglement would all be acceptable as well, as long as they express the idea implied by the original dichotomy, namely that politics and administration should be kept apart and not mixed up. From a constitutional viewpoint, ‘dichotomy’ refers to nothing less but also nothing more than the idea that continuous efforts should be made to preserve the conceptual distinction and practical division between politics and administration. They should not be completely separated, but be kept at a distance of one another.

Another important finding of this study is that both separation and subordination must be included in our concept of dichotomy (cf. Golembiewski 1981: 35). It should not be reduced to either the one or the other: the very tension between them enables the dichotomy to function as a constitutional principle. From a constitutional viewpoint the position of administration towards politics must be one of “subordinate autonomy,” to use Rohr’s apt phrase. This is clearly paradoxical. When should administration be subordinate and when autonomous? Here Rosenbloom’s distinction between ‘partisan politics’ and ‘policy politics’ may be helpful: generally speaking, public administration should be separate

from partisan politics and subordinate to policy politics (cf. Etzioni-Halevy 1983).<sup>11</sup> This seems to me a defensible line of thinking, because it acknowledges the professional independence of administrators as well as their partisan political neutrality. Politicians, on their part, should respect the professional autonomy of civil servants when it comes to policy making and policy implementation, and at the same time not try to involve administrators in their partisan political activities. Svvara has ably and in great detail elaborated the requirements of such a relationship in his complementarity model, and I have no objection to adopting his guidelines here, provided they are recognized to be based on and congruent to the politics-administration dichotomy as a constitutional principle and not an alternative to it.

### 7.3 PURPOSE: THREE RATIONALES

Now that we have specified how the politics-administration dichotomy can and should be understood, the question emerges what we can expect it to accomplish. What can it be meant *for*? In terms of this study, we have to determine the purpose of the dichotomy. To articulate more precisely what the dichotomy should and should not be intended to do, I recur to the table introduced earlier (Table 7.1):

Table 7.1 The main purpose of the dichotomy

	Descriptive	Prescriptive
Theoretical	Politics and administration are separate in thought	Politics and administration should be separate in thought
Practical	Politics and administration are separate in practice	Politics and administration should be separate in practice

First of all, and most importantly, the politics-administration dichotomy cannot be reasonably expected to give an accurate description of governmental reality. From the outset the dichotomy was intended as a normative principle rather than

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<sup>11</sup> Though slightly different, this reminds one of Vivien’s position who said in the mid-nineteenth century already that administration should be separate from politics in particular measures and subordinate to politics in general measures (1859: 42; cf. section 2.5).

as an empirical model, and in the twenty-first century this is even more sensible than it was in the nineteenth. Notwithstanding the fact that a persistent pattern of divergence between politics and administration can be found in most modern states – a divergence which may even be growing sharper again in recent years – the dichotomy on its own clearly does a very poor job describing the highly complex relations and interactions between politicians and administrators. The demands of description overburden the dichotomy, and if meant for this purpose alone it would have to be rejected out of hand.

In reaction to this descriptive inadequacy it has been proposed to understand the dichotomy as a purely theoretical construct without any practical bearing, as an “intellectual escape” (Mosher 1982: 70) or “ideal-type” (Rutgers 2001). This approach, which effectively reduces the dichotomy to a theoretical distinction, seems to me overly cautious and unambitious. To be sure, the politics/administration distinction does serve a valuable analytical function. Even statements saying that politics and administration are mixed, complementary, or simply interrelated presuppose the distinction between the two. As even Svava has acknowledged: “We must be able to tell the difference between politics and administration in order to describe how they are or prescribe how they should be related” (2002: 3). In similar vein, Marini notes with typical pithiness: “It has become almost an obligatory slogan that the so-called ‘politics-administration dichotomy’ is (or should be) dead. Yet the distinction is encountered frequently; it is encountered not infrequently in the very arguments which memorialize its demise and allege its patent ridiculousness” (1994: 3).<sup>12</sup> The distinction remains indispensable for our understanding of government. Postmodern and pragmatic attempts to ‘dissolve’ the distinction and its underlying ‘dualisms’ (e.g., Harmon 2006) have so far not been very successful (section 5.5).

The politics-administration dichotomy is, however, more than a purely theoretical distinction. Above all, it serves practical-prescriptive purposes: it especially intends to say that politics and administration should be separated in governmental practice. This is not to say that the dichotomy does not also serve descriptive and theoretical purposes (it surely does), but historically and theoretically the practical-prescriptive purpose seems to be the most defensible use of the dichotomy. But if the main purpose of the dichotomy is prescriptive and practical rather than descriptive and (merely) theoretical, what is its purpose in substantive terms? What function does it serve in government? In most modern

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<sup>12</sup> Harmon captures the same point: “[O]ne might choose to reject the existence of a dichotomy between politics and administration on the ground that, as a factual matter, the activities that each of the two domains comprise inevitably intrude into those of the other. In order to make any sense, however, the statement requires a prior analytical (functional) distinction in the absence of which we could not know what is intruding into what” (2006: 21).

constitutional states, politics and administration are to a significant degree kept apart. Disregarding for the moment the specific ways in which their division is conceptualized and arranged, it is important to articulate the rationale behind this recurring pattern. Why do we have dichotomy between politics and administration at all? Despite the mass of literature about political-administrative relations, this question has been seldom asked. The answer appears to be threefold, and points to administrative, political, and constitutional rationales.

First, the politics-administration dichotomy helps to safeguard or at least promote the independence and correct functioning of public administration and public administrators and thus serves typical administrative values such as stability, reliability, effectiveness, and efficiency. It does so by upholding the separation of administration from politics, particularly partisan politics, and by promoting the professional autonomy of civil servants. In this respect the dichotomy creates a position for civil servants that is largely comparable to that of judges (Lawler 1988: 52). An additional motive to uphold the dichotomy-as-separation can be the wish to infuse public administration with management techniques or practices adopted from the business sector, but this ambition is certainly not a necessary correlate of the dichotomy. In fact, it is typical only for the Scientific Management movement in American Public Administration during the 1920s and 1930s and the New Public Management movement in international Public Administration since the 1980s. The classics – particularly Weber, but also Goodnow and even Wilson – show that it is possible to support the dichotomy without this additional motive. One can wish to insulate administration from political interference in order to achieve a very different kind of administrative quality, one that is not ‘scientific’ or businesslike but, for instance, morally upright, juridically competent, constitutionally sensitive, demographically representative, citizen-oriented, supportive of minorities, and so on. Thus, those who wish ‘to take politics out of administration’ can still strongly disagree about the ideal character of a depoliticized public administration, but this is a secondary issue. What they agree about is that the main reason to uphold the dichotomy is to protect and thereby to improve public administration.

A second and in many ways opposite view on the rationale of the dichotomy treats the dichotomy primarily as an instrument to protect the interests and quality of politics and politicians against administrative interference, thus serving typically political values such as open deliberation, democratic responsiveness, fair play of the power game, strong leadership, and others. Whenever this is the main purpose of the dichotomy the emphasis is typically not laid on the separation of administration from politics, but rather on its subordination to politics. The notion of ‘the primacy of politics’ is often invoked in this connection, particularly

in literature from the European Continent. The attempt ‘to take administration out of politics’ can be associated especially with Weber, whose main concern in advocating the dichotomy was to protect political leadership against administrative dominance (*Beamtenherrschaft*), but again, as in the previous case, Weber’s heroic and existentialist ideal of politics is definitely not the only option available. Neither is the reason to promote the dichotomy necessarily a democratic one. Many think the dichotomy is based on (representative) democracy, but the dichotomy can also be imagined if not found in non-democratic constitutional states. We do not have the dichotomy because we have a democratic government, but because in our government democratic elements are alloyed with other elements, including administrative ones.

Both approaches can be elaborated somewhat further. Politics and administration are predominantly although not exclusively understood as (representative) democracy and bureaucracy in Western states, and it is particularly in this understanding that upholding the dichotomy is most important and reasonable. Dunsire has elegantly captured the democratic and bureaucratic rationales together:

“[W]e, the masses, need a category of people in public office who will be on ‘short term’ tenure, so that the quality of their stewardship of office can be frequently assessed, and innovation made possible; a class of person who can be got rid of without violence to our consciences or theirs. But we need also a category of public officer on ‘long term’ tenure, so that there can be assurance of the development of skills and expertise, experience and specialization; and in respect of these persons it is better that we should never be put in the position of wishing to get rid of them. So it is clear that this ‘long term’ tenure class must be inhibited from taking sides in matters on which we are likely to be divided amongst ourselves, and that on such a matter, sides should be taken only by the ‘short term people’” (1973: 159).

When politics is conceived as democratic and administration as bureaucratic the relation between them becomes especially tense. Democracy and bureaucracy are after all opposed in several respects: “[T]he principle of hierarchy stands *against* the principle of equality, and the principle of liberty stands *against* discipline, precision, rules” (Waldo 1977: 6; cf. 1984a: lv). Etzioni-Halevy has characterized the relation between bureaucracy and democracy as a double dilemma (1983: 87-93). The bureaucracy, on the one hand, creates a dilemma for democracy, because it is both a threat to and indispensable for democracy: a threat, because it increases state domination and tends to grow exempt from political control; indispensable because it guarantees equality by its nonpartisan allocation of values. Democracy, conversely, also creates a dilemma for bureaucracy, as it demands that the

bureaucracy be both subordinate and independent: the bureaucracy must be under the supervision of politics but is also expected to be professional, and thus to some extent independent. The classics – Wilson and Goodnow on the one hand and Weber on the other – represent opposite sides of this double dilemma. The two Americans emphasized mainly that public administration is indispensable in a democracy and that it should be independent from politics, whereas the European emphasized that public administration can pose a threat to democracy and (therefore) should be subordinated to politics. In the conflict of these two approaches that has so bothered the field of Public Administration for so long (Waldo's quandary), the double dilemma is not fully confronted, but reduced to a dilemma between only two halves of each.

One more crucial step must, however, be made. According to Etzioni-Halevy, the double dilemma of democracy and bureaucracy creates strains and power struggles, and sometimes outright conflict, that can eventually even lead to the breakdown of the constitutional order (1983: 97-98). Hence the administrative and political rationales for the dichotomy are not exhaustive. As each of them serves only one side of the dichotomy, they can not fully explain why we have the two-sided dichotomy, let alone justify why we should keep it. We have to transcend the double dilemma and to find a third more encompassing rationale for the dichotomy. In my view, treating the dichotomy as a constitutional principle serves this purpose. Separating administration from politics and simultaneously subordinating the former to the latter helps to control the tensions between democracy and bureaucracy, creates room for the involvement of citizens, and thus ultimately serves constitutional values such as justice, self-government, and especially liberty. Understood in this way the politics-administration dichotomy is an exercise in what Michael Walzer has called the "art of separation" that is typical of constitutional democracies but conspicuously absent in "authoritarian states, which systematically violate institutional integrity" (1984: 329).

Understanding the dichotomy as a constitutional principle does not imply that a complete and definite separation between politics and administration will ever be established. Upholding the dichotomy is not static but dynamic. It calls for a continuous attempt to keep politics and administration apart and hierarchically ordered. The dichotomy-as-constitutional-principle assumes that out of sheer power hunger or for nobler aims, politicians and administrators will always be tempted to encroach upon each other's territory. The dichotomy is meant to curb this tendency. At the same time, never will a state be achieved in which politics and administration are completely and definitively separated. This is fortunate, too. As Walzer notes: "The art of separation works to isolate social settings. But it obviously doesn't achieve, and can't achieve, anything like total isolation, for

then there would be no society at all” (1984: 327). In other words, the dichotomy should and will always remain a prescriptive and never become descriptive. Constitutionalism is a balancing act between allowing power to exist and at the same time keeping it in check. Every radical attempt to end this tension is at odds with constitutionalism.

All three rationales for the dichotomy are legitimate, but they are not equally important. My argument so far has presupposed a hierarchy in which constitutional values rank above political and administrative values. Constitutionalism itself implies that the constitutionalist rationale for the dichotomy transcends and overrides the bureaucratic and democratic rationales. Serving political and administrative values can never be the final goal; the common good for which government ultimately exists is something broader. Therefore, if a dilemma occurred in which disentangling politics and administration could serve the promotion of a constitutional value such as liberty but at the cost of democratic politics and bureaucratic administration (e.g., because politicians would lose some of their popularity or because a policy would become less effective), we should be willing to make the administrative and political costs for this constitutional purpose and uphold the dichotomy. That the dichotomy also serves bureaucratic and democratic values is not negligible, indeed it is evidently very valuable, but it is a secondary blessing. To say that constitutional values rank higher does, of course, not mean that we do not have to care about political and administrative values. In fact, they presuppose each other: as politics cannot function well without a professional and loyal administration, and administration not without strong and responsible political leadership, likewise constitutionalism cannot thrive without authoritative political leadership and strong administrative capacity. In particular, constitutionalism requires a certain power balance between politics and administration. Although so far we know embarrassingly little about the exact mechanisms, it is clear that this tension between political control and administrative independence, between subordination and separation, contributes to the preservation and promotion of constitutional values.

#### 7.4 RELEVANCE: ESCAPING FROM THE QUANDARY

The starting point of this study was the quandary formulated by Waldo that “we can neither accept the politics-administration formula nor get along without it” (1982: IX, 6; cf. Waldo and Marini 1999: 522). This was not an idiosyncratic concern of Waldo only, but a puzzle that has occupied the field of Public Administration for about sixty years now. It is echoed, for instance, by March and Olsen: “Everyone ‘knows’ that policy making and administration should be kept distinct. At the same

time, everyone ‘knows’ that policy making and administration cannot be kept distinct and that the distinction itself is difficult to make precise” (1989: 141).<sup>13</sup> There are several ways to deal with a quandary like this. One might be simply to ignore it, but the issue is too fundamental to make that a realistic option. The issue lies at the root of the identity crisis of Public Administration. Moreover, we cannot avoid the simple practical question why modern states (should) continue to differentiate between politics and administration at all. These are not issues that we can easily ‘grow over’ as the field becomes more mature, as Harmon (2006) suggests. Alternatively, one might choose to retain and appreciate the quandary as it stands, leaving the tension unresolved. This approach is favored by March and Olsen in the passage just quoted, but it is not the approach I have taken. Although I have argued that certain tensions can certainly be beneficial and productive (such as that between separation and subordination), I have also tried to discern the meanings of the dichotomy we cannot live with from those we can live with. This implies that, although I have tried to counter many misguided attacks on the dichotomy, I have not unconditionally defended every possible meaning given to it. The dichotomy can be and indeed has sometimes been carried too far. Instead, I have tried to identify an understanding that does make sense (the dichotomy as constitutional principle) and distinguish it from less meaningful understandings of the dichotomy, particularly from the instrumentalist dichotomy of politics-as-deciding and administration-as-execution, from the policy-instead-of-politics-administration dichotomy, and from the dichotomy-as-testable-empirical-generalization.

The ‘relevance’ of the dichotomy, in my definition, has to do with the question whether and why (i.e., on the basis of which arguments) the dichotomy can be and should be endorsed. Clearly, the three aspects of its meaning – content, purpose, and relevance – are interdependent. We can adapt our conceptualization of the dichotomy to a particular purpose, or choose a purpose that best fits our default conceptualization of the dichotomy. Most of all, the relevance of the dichotomy depends on the combination of its content and purpose: in some conceptualizations and uses the dichotomy is more relevant than in others. This is not as trivial as it may sound. As we have seen, the Public Administration literature contains many claims about the relevance, and particularly the irrelevance, of the dichotomy that are not based on serious attempts to determine its content and purpose. However, if we are to give any judgment on the relevance of an idea we must know what

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<sup>13</sup> The quandary is also aptly summarized by Harris: “Many people argue that civil servants constantly make *political* decisions, and that it is not realistic to separate politics from administration. Of course civil servants are *in* the political world because elected politicians are in theory their masters. However civil servants are not *of* the political world because it is believed in many developed states that civil servants should be neutral and should not take sides” (1990: 10).

it amounts to and what it is intended for. Just as the value of a hammer depends on the shape, strength, and other characteristics of the thing itself and the kind of work one wants to do with it, likewise the relevance of the dichotomy depends on the combination of its content and purpose. For example, conceptualized as a strict separation between deciding and executing (content), the dichotomy is not very useful (relevance) for describing governmental reality (purpose).

The very suggestion that the politics-administration dichotomy can be relevant at all will be hard to swallow for many students of public administration. I have derived it first and foremost from Waldo, whose writings reveal that he became increasingly aware of the relevance of the dichotomy, although he also remained ambivalent (Waldo and Marini 1999: 520-522). In this study I have attempted to continue Waldo's line of thinking from the point where he left it. He only tentatively suggested the constitutional workings of the dichotomy and nowhere elaborated on possible ways to reconcile the dichotomy with the separation-of-powers doctrine. On his work I have built the two main elements of my account, namely first, my understanding of the dichotomy as a layered construct with different meanings on different levels of generality, in which the democracy/bureaucracy distinction occupies an important but not exclusive position, and second, my proposal to regard the dichotomy as a constitutional principle that demands a continuous effort to keep politics and administration apart in our system of government in order to preserve not only administrative (or bureaucratic) and political (or democratic) but above all constitutional values. Together these elements provide my understanding of the content and purpose and hence the relevance of the dichotomy and thus my answer to the central question of this study: *What is the meaning of the politics-administration dichotomy?*

Who may profit from this reconstruction of the dichotomy as a constitutional principle with different conceptual layers? The approach seems first of all important for administrative theorists who have so far not regarded and appreciated the dichotomy from a constitutional point of view. Even representatives of the so-called Constitutional School have treated the dichotomy with unnecessary suspicion and ambivalence, although some of them have also recognized its merits. Yet the idea to treat the dichotomy as a constitutional principle well suits their ideas about the place of public administration in the constitutional order. While I concur with them that the study of public administration in general might benefit from greater attention to constitutionalism and constitutional thinking (Rohr 1989; Carter 1986; Maletz 1998), I suggest that the politics-administration dichotomy can become an important part of that perspective.

More empirically oriented students of public administration, second, can take the dichotomy-as-constitutional-principle as an important object of their

research. My argument is not merely that the dichotomy should be understood as a constitutional principle, but also that it already is part of modern constitutional thought and practice, though largely unrecognized. As an important norm in practice, the dichotomy can be studied from a (classical) institutionalist perspective. Alternatively, the dichotomy-as-constitutional-principle can also be adopted as a standard by which to assess the constitutional condition of governments around the world.

Recognizing the politics-administration dichotomy as a constitutional principle might further serve to remove a blind spot of constitutional theorists from the fields of Law and Political Science. Even as we live in what is aptly called an administrative state, they typically continue to neglect the administrative side of government:

“Political theorists and social commentators concerned with the future of liberal democratic constitutionalism have paid public administration very little heed, except perhaps for the concern about bureaucratic tyranny. That is a serious oversight, for any theory of democratic constitutionalism that does not incorporate, to use John Rohr’s label, a ‘constitutional theory of public administration’ is fatally deficient” (Cook 1996: 176).

Because constitutional theorists tend to overlook public administration as a constitutionally relevant player in modern government, they have so far not explicitly recognized the politics-administration dichotomy as a constitutional principle either. Constitutional thought shows a preoccupation with the separation-of-powers doctrine which tends to draw attention away from the politics-administration dichotomy. Perhaps my reconstruction of the dichotomy can help to change this situation.

Finally, thinking about the dichotomy as a constitutional principle can also be relevant for practitioners (politicians as well as administrators, but also others, such as judges, lobbyists, journalists, and so on). Their professionalism requires a clear awareness of the constitutional principles that shape the context in which they have to work. In particular, it requires an awareness of their constitutional position and the established but often implicit norms that govern their role and position – including the politics-administration dichotomy. As Vile has put it, one should expect from public officials “a *conscious* attempt to maintain a distinction between what they have been taught to regard as their own *primary* functions and the primary functions of other officials” (1998: 356).<sup>14</sup> Rohr has

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<sup>14</sup> He adds: “Thus professional loyalty, or integrity, the acknowledgment that a certain ‘function’ is their primary concern, is an essential ingredient in the attitudes of ministers, judges, and administrators in the constitutional State” (Vile 1998: 356).

tried to make civil servants aware of their constitutional responsibility in his *Ethics for Bureaucrats* (1989) and other writings, but unfortunately he dismissed the dichotomy too easily. More sensible, in this regard, Merry has observed that making practitioners and citizens aware of the importance of, in his case, the “presidential-administrative separation” is a worthwhile “educational challenge” (1978: 105).

Clearly, endorsing the dichotomy as a constitutional principle goes against the grain of the way in which many academics and practitioners currently teach and think. There is a strong tendency to blot out distinctions and divisions that used to be regarded as important. In many approaches, both the overly realistic or cynical and the overly idealistic or naïve, the dichotomy between politics and administration is erased. In part, this follows from the mistaken assumption that when social reality becomes more complex, our conceptual frameworks can be allowed to become less precise, too. Attempts to solve the quandary of the dichotomy by subsuming politics and administration under such general labels as “things governmental” (Waldo 1987: 92) or “governance” (Harmon 2006) beg the question, however. Even the Constitutional School’s general call on administrators to act as ‘statesmen’ threatens to keep hardly any distinct form of a-political administration left. Politics and administration depend upon each other. To preserve them both, even to preserve one of them, we should pit them against each other in a dichotomous relationship. We have to ‘live with’ the politics-administration dichotomy: “Unless the administrative state is abolished altogether – an unlikely eventuality – in some sense politics will have to be taken out of administration” (Vile 1998: 401).

As I have written elsewhere (Overeem 2008: 42), much criticism of the dichotomy in contemporary Public Administration, especially in America but also in Western Europe, starts from a luxury position. In contrast to failed, weak, dictatorial, and totalitarian states, modern constitutional states are blessed with a relatively clear and stable division of roles and responsibilities between politics and administration. Proposals to ‘dissolve’ the dichotomy or replace it by concepts such as ‘complementarity’ can only be seriously put forward because the dichotomy is firmly in place – so firmly, indeed, that its existence and importance tend to be forgotten. But like other constitutional principles, the dichotomy requires a clear awareness and continuous vigilance. It should not be thoughtlessly taken for granted, but consciously and carefully cultivated. Overlooking the constitutional value of the dichotomy can have serious consequences. Waldo poses the fundamental question what modern states would be without the politics-administration dichotomy. The answer he gives to that question (either utopian or totalitarian) can only cause uneasiness for critics of the dichotomy.

A sobering observation is also due. We should not overestimate the extent to which the dichotomy can solve the major problems in our governmental theories and practices. As a constitutional principle, the politics-administration dichotomy is an institutional solution to a practical problem. As such, it is necessarily insufficient in itself: the quality of government ultimately depends on the moral and technical quality of its laws, rulers, and citizens and not merely on its institutional design. The dichotomy thus appears a necessary but not a sufficient requirement for the safeguarding of constitutional values in contemporary states. Moreover, as a constitutional principle the politics-administration dichotomy is by definition not absolute, but entangled with and counterbalanced by other constitutional principles. The principle of the rule of law, for instance, binds politicians and administrators together and thus counterbalances the dichotomy. Constitutionalism is not a matter of logic but of prudent decision. Tensions inevitably remain, as they should. As in architecture, counterbalancing tensions all serve to uphold the structure of constitutional government. This also means that the removal of the dichotomy will dangerously weaken the form of government most people in the Western world hold dear. As Nicole de Montricher has put it in a recent formulation of the French approach that, I hope, will turn out prophetic: “The twenty-first century sees positively the powers that balance the possibly oppressive behavior of a neutral administration. Technocracy and the hazardous tyranny of a political majority should be challenged” (2003: 293).

### 7.5 ‘A COMMONSENSE USEFULNESS’

While endorsing the politics-administration dichotomy is unacceptable for most of today’s theorists in Public Administration, many other people outside and inside government, happily unaware of the state of administrative scholarship, tend to accept the dichotomy (in some version or another) as not particularly problematic. The idea seems to fit their common sense notions of how government does and should work quite comfortably. Of course, this fact in itself does not speak in favor of the dichotomy. It only means that we face a tension between the carefully thought-out views of specialized scholars on the one hand, and the comparatively less informed opinions of practitioners and citizens on the other. In this final section I want to argue that my constitutional understanding of the politics-administration dichotomy can resolve or at least weaken this tension and bring administrative theory and common sense into closer harmony.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Note that I here refer only to ‘lower-case’ common sense, not to philosophical concepts of common sense such as those advanced by Thomas Reid or the Pragmatist William James.

In *The Administrative State*, near the end of the ninth chapter, Waldo offers some interesting reflections on the relation between science and common sense in general and the worth of common sense for Public Administration in particular. His basic conviction is that the two need not be incompatible: “Rightly conceived, common sense is indeed a desirable quality in administration and administrative study” (1948: 190). Of course, administrative scholarship should go beyond common sense, but it should at the same time also be based on it, he believed. In a particularly in a practically-oriented field like Public Administration, the common opinions of practitioners and other insiders should be taken seriously. Thus, Waldo offered a nuanced but mainly positive assessment of common sense.

When it comes to the politics-administration dichotomy, however, its commonsensical nature is often presented as a weakness rather than as a strength. Dunsire, for instance, has drawn a contrast between “academic theorists” and “practitioners” – i.e., the users of common sense – and argued that the dichotomy is relevant only for the latter:

“Newtonian physics is good enough for everyday purposes; and so, in our present field, is the politics/administration dichotomy, perhaps. Most practitioners, even at lower hierarchical levels, would agree that there is a need for *some* theory or another to justify the difference between the career official and the elected politician, and would find that the conventional dichotomy still made reasonably good sense in most circumstances” (1973: 200).

Just like academic physicists have replaced Newton’s theories by those of Einstein, Dunsire suggests, likewise administrative theorists should abandon the dichotomy and adopt a more refined theory of the relation between politics and administration instead. Waldo has made a similar analogy, stating that the dichotomy “*still* serves some useful purposes both in academia and in government, in the same way that ordinary instruments of measurement continue to serve useful purposes after the invention of much more sensitive instruments” (1980: 69). He suggests that as we learn to use these more refined and sophisticated alternatives, we can ultimately get rid of the suboptimal dichotomy.

These analogies are problematic for several reasons. For a start, it is not true that more sophisticated alternatives are available that serve the same purpose as the dichotomy (Chapter Five). As long as there has been no administrative Einstein, we will have to work with the old ‘Newtonian’ dichotomy. More important, Dunsire’s and Waldo’s analogies suggest that the dichotomy primarily fails because it is imprecise when it comes to description, but as we have seen (section 4.3, 5.6, and 7.3), it is much better taken as prescriptive. Finally, the analogy between Physics and Public Administration is misleading. In our field

we cannot hope, and perhaps should not even desire, to achieve the same measure and kind of exactness as in the natural sciences. Administrative, political, and constitutional principles are necessarily rather general. Not only that, but Public Administration is also an applied field of study in which the accepted notions of practitioners have to be taken seriously. Neglecting them would indeed be imprecise. Therefore common sense carries rightly carries substantial weight for the administrative theorist: he should be careful never to be too much out of with governmental reality. Rather than a weakness, therefore, the commonsensical character of the politics-administration dichotomy can be regarded a strength. As Waldo has noted, “the politics-administration formulation has an intuitive appeal and a commonsense usefulness. In many situations it represents a first approximation to understanding; and in some situations it may be a sufficient rationale for action” (Waldo and Marini 1999: 285).<sup>16</sup>

I conclude with Stene’s way to illustrate the commonsensical character of the dichotomy and the absurdity of its rejection. In a little noticed, one-page ‘Parable on Politics and Administration’ (1975a), he tells the story of a revolution in “the scientific discourses among water color analysts,” initiated by the work of a certain professor Turk Quoistig who discovered that respondents confronted with “a color card of turquoise shade” could not agree upon an “operational distinction between blue and green”. As a result of these findings, the community of water color analysts came to agree that “the blue-green dichotomy has been thoroughly discredited” and that henceforth one could properly speak “only in terms of the amount of yellow mixed in”. But this was not the end of it, because soon other colors were also discovered to blend into one another. Therefore these specialists, unhampered by the persistent stupidity in the outer world, came to conclude that “[n]o one could suggest any distinction between proper and improper use of colors, or of honesty or dishonesty in the identification of colors”. In effect, they not only abandoned a set of workable distinctions but undermined their own scientific field.

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<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Waldo expressed the same thought even more pointedly, although a bit pejoratively: “All considered, the idea that a distinction can be made between politics and administration is simplistic but not absurd. It is simplistic because so many governmental phenomena are a mix of some variety of politics/policy and administration/management. It is not absurd because often there is enough of a distinction to have analytic and prescriptive importance. The distinction is important enough to justify institutional structures and operating procedures” (1987: 106).