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Johannes Althusius on Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

After centuries of neglect, the political thought of Johannes Althusius (1557–1638) is receiving renewed scholarly attention. His thinking about administration, however, has so far been hardly considered, even though more than half of his most important work (Politica Methodice Digesta) is devoted to it. This article explores Althusius's discussion of administration and its relation to his views on politics and communication. In particular, it discusses what (public) administration actually is, according to Althusius, who exercises it, and how it should be performed. Although Althusius's Calvinist approach is clearly at odds with some basic tenets of modern thinking, it can foster a better understanding of public administration's role in the present-day situation of diffusing state sovereignty. Moreover, he reminds us that public administration is a mandate from the people and needs to be exercised with prudence.

This article is an exploratory account of the administrative thought of Johannes Althusius (1557–1638). It is no exaggeration to say that this Calvinist city administrator and humanist professor from the northwestern part of present-day Germany has long been, and still is, largely unknown. After a three-century period of relative obscurity, however, a notable revival of scholarly interest in his work has occurred. Particularly conducive to this revival were the contributions first of Otto von Gierke (1880/1981) and then of Carl Joachim Friedrich (e.g., 1975). Ever since, a few dedicated scholars from various Western countries have studied Althusius's writings, particularly his *Politica* (e.g., Dahm, Krawietz, & Wyduckel, 1988; Skillen, 1974). Many of these “Althusiasts” are organized in the active Althusius Gesellschaft (www.althusius.de).

This revival has led not only to increased historiographical and philosophical interest in Althusius's work, but also to a number of applications of his thought. Thus, he has been presented as an inspirer of the Israeli kibbutz, of Yugoslav constitution-making, and of Western consociationalism (Elazar, 1991, n.d.). More commonly, he is praised as an important precursor of modern

ideas about constitutional government, popular sovereignty, civil society, and especially federalism (e.g., Woltring, 1998). Answers to modern questions about such matters as European integration are being sought from Althusius (Hüglin, 1999). At the same time, the compatibility of Althusius's position with modern liberal thought has been contested (Ossewaarde, 2007).

What despite all this is still hardly known, or at least rarely noticed in the literature (indeed sometimes expressly left out of consideration), is that Althusius also had much to say about (public) administration in his magnum opus (1614/1995)—not only in chapters 29–37, which are explicitly devoted to “secular administration,” but throughout the book. Uses of the Latin verb *administrare* and its derivatives, including *administratio*, appear literally hundreds of times in his book (for a count, see Ingravalle, 2010, p. 110). As O’Donovan and Lockwood O’Donovan observe: “The *Politics* presents simultaneously an architectonic political conception and a more detailed organizational and administrative blueprint” (1999, p. 758). Scholarly attention, however, has so far been remarkably unevenly distributed over these two aspects of his work. To be sure, Althusius has occasionally been mentioned as one of the earliest European forerunners of the study of public administration, for instance because of his ideas about the characteristics desired of public officials (Raadschelders & Rutgers, 1996, p. 75). One author has even explicitly suggested that Althusius was an early representative of “the general process of social disciplining, going with the establishment of the domain of public administration and the development of a *Polizeiwissenschaft*” (Barzazi, 2007, p. 404). What is lacking so far, however, is a substantial treatment of Althusius’s thinking about (public) administration as such. In the secondary literature, most discussions have dealt with the first, political part of the *Politica*, and much less attention has been paid to the second, administrative part (Behnen, 1984, pp. 417–418). I have found only two sources dealing explicitly with Althusius’s important concept of *administratio* (Ingravalle, 2010; Knöll, 2011, sec. 11) and two others dealing with his views on rulership (Behnen, 1984; Duso, 2002). This article aims to bring these disparate, mostly German, and hence unknown interpretations together so as to offer a basic account of Althusius’s administrative thought.

Addressing an Anglophone public administration readership that will mostly be unacquainted with Althusius, this article quotes from the widely available English translation of the *Politica* by Frederick S. Carney (1965; I use the 1995 reprint in this article, cited with page numbers only). Many chapters in Carney’s edition are severely abridged, leaving out lengthy classical and scriptural quotations and references but little substantive argument. To preserve accuracy, I have cross-checked all quotations with the 1610 Latin original and the abridged but more complete 2003 German edition by Janssen (and have corrected them, if necessary, with insertions in brackets). For secondary sources, I have consulted, besides the normal catalogues and

reference lists, the *Althusius-Bibliographie* (Scupin & Scheuner, 1973) as well as the current president of the Althusius Gesellschaft, Prof. Dr. Heinrich de Wall, so as to be sure to cover most of the relevant literature. As the present article concentrates on Althusius's concept of public administration, other aspects of his work for which he is (rightly) deemed important, such as his ideas on federalism, consociationalism, and popular sovereignty, are only touched upon in passing.

After giving some basic facts about Althusius's life and work, I will briefly consider some general characteristics of his thought, his special "method," and the place of administration in his wider political thought. Subsequently, I will explore three aspects of his administrative thought, namely, first, *what* administration actually amounts to for Althusius, then, *who* exercises administration in the state he conceives, and last, *how* administration should (and should not) be performed. I conclude with some remarks about the relevance of Althusius for the present-day study of public administration. Of course, an article dealing with such a large number of issues can only treat them all rather briefly and must necessarily be exploratory (for another introduction, see Menk, 2011). In my treatment of Althusius's thought, I try to start not from our contemporary concerns, as so many commentators on Althusius have done, but from what he himself had to say (Winters, 1977, pp. 29–30).

LIFE AND WORK

Johann Althaus, better known as Johannes Althusius, was born, probably in 1563, in Diedenshausen, Westphalia (Germany). From 1581, he studied Aristotle in Cologne and law in Basle and Geneva, and in 1586, he received his doctorate in both civil and ecclesiastical law from the university of Basle. In the same year, he also published his first book, *Jurisprudentia romana* [Roman Jurisprudence]. During his studies in these Swiss cities, he was strongly influenced by Calvinist thought, especially that of French Huguenots like François Hotman and Denis Godefroy—thinkers who because of their opposition to royal absolutism would later become known, somewhat crudely, as monarchomachs ("king-slayers").

Soon after completing his studies, Althusius became a law professor and later rector at the then-prestigious Reformed academy of Herborn, Germany, as a successor to the famous theologian Kaspar Olevianus. He also continued publishing: in 1601 a work on ethics (*Civilis conversationis libri duo* [Two Volumes on Civil Intercourse]) and in 1603 the first edition of what is now regarded as his most important work, *Politica methodice digesta atque exemplis sacris et profanis illustrata* [Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples]. In 1610 and 1614, the second and third (enlarged) editions of the latter work saw the light of day. In 1617, finally, Althusius published his *Dicaelologica* [The Logic of Law], an immense

work offering a “comprehensive legal synthesis of biblical law, Roman law, and various customary laws” (O’Donovan & Lockwood O’Donovan, 1999, p. 758; see Witte, 2009). (The promisingly titled *Disputatio politica de regno recte instituendo et administrando* [Political Disputation on the Realm’s Right Institution and Administration] (1602) is only a set of 75 academic theses about the social covenant and the right of resistance, and adds nothing substantial to the *Politica*; see Stolleis, 1987.)

The *Politica* immediately received considerable admiration and probably was responsible for Althusius’s appointment, in 1604, to the post of syndic of Emden in East Friesland, the city’s highest administrative office. This Calvinist city, sometimes called the Geneva of the North, was by then one of the main strongholds of Protestant thought in northwestern Europe. It had taken in many Dutch (mainly Calvinist) refugees, and it was the place where in 1571 an important Reformed synod had been held. Althusius acted as Emden’s syndic for no less than 34 turbulent years, from 1604 until his death in 1638 (Antholz, 1955, 1988). Moreover, in 1617 Althusius was elected a church elder. With this double position in civil and ecclesiastical administration, he played a very powerful role in Emden, one that has been compared to that of Calvin in Geneva (Carney, 1995, p. xii; Esser, 1988; McCulloch, 2006, pp. 494–498; Winters, 1977, p. 49), although Calvin had formally only a position in the church, not in city government.

In these functions, Althusius got ample opportunity to bring his academic views into practice, and, according to O’Donovan and Lockwood O’Donovan, he certainly took the chance: “Once appointed, he proved not at all reluctant to apply his principles and ideas” (1999, p. 758). He exercised a strong and quite intolerant form of Calvinist rule, curtailing the religious freedom not only of Catholics but even of Lutherans and other dissidents (Behnen, 1984, pp. 425, n. 23, 464–465; see Dirks, n.d.). Strategically, Althusius applied his theological and political views on the right of resistance against tyrannical princes when he “transformed the city’s relationship to its territorial overlord, the count of East Frisia, from one of unilateral homage to one of mutual covenanting” (O’Donovan & Lockwood O’Donovan, 1999, p. 758; see McCulloch, 2006, p. 496). Conversely, and more relevant for us, Althusius’s responsibilities as a high-ranking municipal magistrate seem also to have left a mark on his administrative ideas. To see what these amount to, I will now concentrate on his discussion of *administratio* within the broader structure of the *Politica*.

POLITICS METHODICALLY SET FORTH

The phrase *methodice digesta* in the title of the *Politica* refers to the fact that in his book, Althusius makes use of the approach, or “method,” developed by the French Calvinist logician Pierre de la Ramée, better known as Petrus Ramus, who attacked scholasticism and aimed to develop a more systematic and sim-

pler alternative to Aristotle's logic (for a lucid exposition, see Carney, 1995, pp. xiii–xiv). Instead of building constructs of syllogistic reasoning, his system started from “definitions and postulates, the material of which was found in the empirical sciences themselves” (Skillen, 1974, p. 171). In this inductive way, Ramus believed, logic could be used “to clarify not only what may be said for or against propositions and combinations of propositions, but also how a field of study may be “‘logically’ organized” (Carney, 1995, p. xiii). The proper ordering of disciplines was seen as a matter of justice and believed to be helpful for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Although Ramism was controversial from the start, it enjoyed some popularity, especially in Calvinist circles, where it was used to achieve a logical hierarchy of the sciences.

The most striking characteristic of the Ramist method is its preoccupation with the ordering of knowledge between and within distinct disciplines through a seemingly endless use of dichotomies or binary trees. This is exactly what Althusius did in his book. Having stated in the most general sense what, in his view, politics is about, he divides and subdivides his subject matter continuously, until he arrives at the most particular and concrete issues. In this way, he tries to demarcate the study of politics from that of law or jurisprudence, theology, and (moral) philosophy. With this aim, Althusius intended his *Politics* to serve as a textbook for “beginning students of political doctrine” (p. 3). Precisely because of its Ramist method, it is a work with “a highly architectonic quality” (Carney, 1995, p. xiv). In the next section I briefly discuss the place of *administratio* in the structure of Althusius's wider political thought and then turn to what Elazar has called “the second half of Althusian thought: that dealing with statesmanship, prudence and administration” (1995, p. xlv).

ADMINISTRATION IN ALTHUSIUS'S THOUGHT

Because of the methodical structure of Althusius's work, it is not very difficult to locate the topic of administration within the wider structure of his political thought. Althusius opens his *Politica* with a proposition that guides the rest of his argument:

Politics is the art of associating (*consociandi*) men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them. Whence it is called “symbiotics.” The subject matter of politics is therefore association (*consociatio*), in which the symbiotes pledge themselves each to the other, by explicit or tacit agreement, to mutual communication of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious exercise of social life. (p. 17)

So politics is about living together in associations for mutual sharing or, to use his term, *communication*. Now, in different degrees, all human associations rest on a combination of natural necessity (because nobody is self-sufficient) and human volition (i.e., the consent and agreement of the members participating

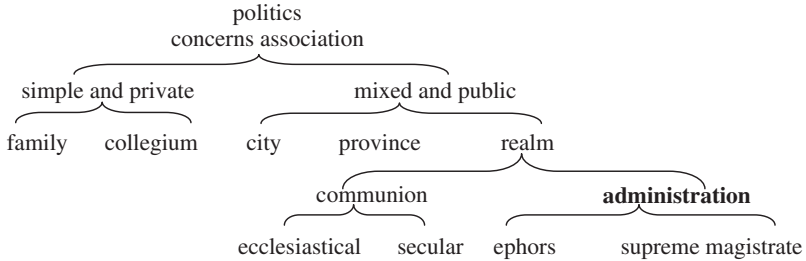


Figure 1. The Place of Administration

Source: Adapted from Carney, 1995, pp. lviii–lix, as well as Althusius, 1614/2003, pp. 9–11.

in the association). In this sense, associations can be said to be both natural and covenantal at the same time. Life in political associations, according to Althusius, is symbiotic: There is a natural, mutual dependence between the members to which they should willingly agree (for a lucid and critical account, see Ossewaarde, 2007; for Althusius’s concept of *consociatio*, see Knöll, 2011, sec. 4, and Zwierlein, 2010).

As Althusius points out, there are “simple and private” associations on the one hand, namely the family and the collegium (i.e., the professional guild, especially), and “mixed and public” associations on the other, namely the city, province, and commonwealth (see Figure 1).

I now pass over Althusius’s treatment of the private associations, however instructive, and move on to his treatment of the public associations: the city, province, and realm (the state). Although in the scheme described above, only the last of these is subdivided in communion and administration, this important distinction is in fact present in the other two as well (pp. 46 and 51, respectively). Thus we see that in each of them administration has its place in contradistinction with the concept of communion or communication. In all associations, and especially in public ones, there is a need not only for agreement and mutual sharing among their members, but also for *imperium*. This term is difficult to translate, and is often erroneously equated with the modern concept of sovereignty, but it actually means something like “strong rule” (p. 68, n. 5; see Duso, 2002; Knöll, 2011, sec. 6). *Imperium* or (the closely related) *gubernatio* is indispensable, because its absence is literally the same as anarchy: the absence of rule (*an-archè*). Now rule requires the existence of hierarchical differences within society. Indeed, complete equality amounts to a situation of anarchy. Althusius quotes Petrus Gregorius (Pierre Grégoire of Toulouse), saying: “If all were truly equal, and each wished to rule others according to his own will [and others refused to be ruled], discord would easily arise, and by discord the dissolution of society” (p. 26). Thus,

anarchy is not only the absence of rule, but also the negation of politics understood as symbiotics. *Imperium* or *gubernatio* (today one would perhaps say “leadership”) is needed to turn the diversity of members into a unity and make true “communication” possible (Duso, 2002, p. 24).

So Althusius saw the need for strong rule: “Communication requires imperium, or strong rule, to be effective” (Carney, 1995, p. xvi). At the same time, and in clear contrast with Bodin particularly, he was also a strong opponent of absolutism and emphasized the need for power control. This was necessary, he believed, because “great power cannot contain itself within boundaries without some coercion and constraint entrusted to others” (p. 104). More specifically, he was a constitutionalist, which is to say that he wanted to limit power by means of divine and positive *law*: “All power is limited by definite boundaries and laws [and never] absolute, infinite, unbridled, arbitrary, and lawless [but] bound to laws, right, and equity. Likewise, every civil power that is constituted by legitimate means can be terminated and abolished” (p. 115). Or, as he puts it elsewhere: “Power is [more] secure that places a control upon force, that rules willing subjects, and that is circumscribed by laws, so that it does not become haughty and engage in excesses to the ruin of the subjects, nor degenerate into tyranny” (p. 121). In short, real communion requires effective yet lawful and limited rule.

THE MEANING OF ADMINISTRATION

Having set the wider framework of his political thought, let us now explore how Althusius’s discussion of administration develops. This concept is not exactly the same as *imperium* or *gubernatio*, which both stress the steering aspect of rulership, but has its own, so far unspecified, meaning, one that seems more oriented toward the serving aspect (Ingravalle, 2010, pp. 107–108). The first question that arises is: What actually is administration, according to Althusius? For an answer, I concentrate on the context of the greatest political community, the realm (*regno*), leaving lower associations, such as cities and provinces, out of consideration. We have seen that Althusius, following the Ramist method, made a dichotomy between communion and administration. This is the fundamental contrast (rather than that with *imperium*) by which, in his thought, administration acquires its meaning. But what is it, actually, that is being communicated and administered? Althusius captures the object of both under three headings: things or goods, services, and right(s). The last is by far the most important (sometimes Althusius limits himself to this alone; see Knöll, 2011, p. 337). The right of the realm (*ius regni*), he says, “pertains both to the welfare of the soul and to the care of the body” (p. 74). And, he continues, “Each part of this right of the realm . . . consists of universal symbiotic communion and of its administration” (ibid.). The right of the realm, with regard to both religious and temporal matters, is communicated among

the members of the realm and at the same time administered to them.

Chapters 9–17 deal with universal symbiotic communion, both of the ecclesiastical and the secular kind. Chapter 18, then, is an important point of transition, because in it Althusius explicitly turns to the *administration* of the rights of the realm—or, in his words, the universal administration of symbiotic right—and he also gives a definition:

We have thus far discussed the right of communion in the universal association. We now turn our attention to the administration of this right. This is the activity by which the rights (*jura*) of universal symbiotic association are ordered, properly administered, and dispensed by designated public ministers of the realm for the welfare of its members, both individually and collectively. (p. 92)

So administration, for Althusius, is an activity; *administratio*, like *communicatio*, is something that is being performed. He nowhere speaks about “the administration” as an institution (but at most about the *constitutio administratorum Reipub.*, the regime of those who administer the commonwealth). In his thought, administration is always the administration of something—namely, in this case particularly, of “the rights of universal symbiotic association,” or simply the highest rights of the political community. What it is that is actually being administered is even clearer in another definition of administration that can be found in the *Politica*:

The administration of the commonwealth or realm . . . is the wise, diligent, and just care, management, oversight, and defense of the rights of sovereignty . . . that is, of the affairs and goods of the realm and its subjects, in accord with their nature and condition. It is directed to the glory of God and to the welfare of the realm and its subjects. (p. 135; see Achterberg, 1988, p. 505)

Althusius’s concept of administration seems to diverge from modern concepts of administration on at least two points. First, administration is for him not so much the direct delivery of certain public goods and services to individual citizens as the arrangement and facilitation of different social functions in such a way that the general welfare of the whole is promoted. As Althusius explains it:

This administration is the bond by which the commonwealth holds together, and its vital spirit by which the various and diverse human functions of the association are directed, ordered, and referred to the welfare of all. Whence it is evident that such administration does not execute or perform these functions, but only establishes, orders, and directs them, which it does by ruling, [forbidding, commanding], and impeding. (p. 92)

In contemporary parlance: Administration is steering, not rowing. Although much of administration (e.g., censorship) does of course affect citizens individually, Althusius says that as a rule, “this administration pertains not to individuals, but only to the members of the realm collectively,” that is, to the cities, the provinces, and other collective bodies rather than private individuals (p. 135). This has led Ossewaarde to claim that, for Althusius, “the state has an administrative but no creative calling” (2007, p. 118) and that “[Althusius’s] state is not a political community of citizens, but an administrative sphere of provinces, cities, and municipalities” (2007, p. 123). These contrasts seem too stark, but they do underline the centrality, for Althusius, of administration within the state and its relatively indirect workings on the people.

Second, for Althusius administration does not in the first place mean the execution of law(s). Indeed, he describes the “execution of law (*lex*)” (specifically understood as “the preserving of external public discipline” and hence as “the administration of justice”) under the heading of *communication* of general right (pp. 79, 83). So, for him, punishing delinquents was apparently a matter of communicating universal symbiotic right rather than of administering that right. This is not to say, of course, that the execution of the law is unimportant. To the contrary:

Law should be accurately and precisely executed. For law without execution is like a bell without a clapper. It would be as if the magistrate were mute or dead. . . . The magistrate has been constituted for the sake of executing law, [to be] a living law [a servant and guard of the mute law]. (p. 177)

In the modern, sovereign, administrative state, however, public administration is often simply limited to “execution,” based on a flawed understanding of the separation-of-powers doctrine. In modern times, “the [administrative] State is defined as the executioner of the sovereign will” (Ossewaarde, 2007, p. 119; see Duso, 2002, p. 21). For Althusius, however, administration is not the mere execution of the singular will of a collective sovereign, for there is none in his symbiotic conception of political life, but rather the allocation of the rights of the realm (*jus regni*) or, what amounts to the same, the realization of the right of sovereignty (*jus majestatis*) of which the people are the principal bearer. Hence, administrators (the supreme magistrate as well as the lower magistrates) are not imposing legal directions on state subjects, but providing citizens with their rights and protecting those rights. If *gubernatio* is a matter of leading, *administratio* is one of serving (Ingravalle, 2010).

STEWARDS OF UNIVERSAL RIGHT

Our second question asked *who* actually exercises the administration. Althusius is quite convinced that “the people itself cannot manage the administration

of these rights” (p. 93) and therefore have to elect or appoint officials who do it for them. However, Althusius seems to be ambiguous about who does this. On the one hand, he says that the administration is carried out by both the ephors and the *summus magistratus* (“Administrators of this universal association are of two kinds: the ephors and the supreme magistrate”; p. 99). On the other hand, he says that only the supreme magistrate actually executes and performs the administrative functions: “the prince or supreme magistrate is the steward, administrator, and overseer of these rights [of sovereignty]” (p. 7). And elsewhere he says that administration “is granted by the people and conducted by the magistrate” (p. 135). So who does the administration: both the ephors and the supreme magistrate, or the latter only? (As is characteristic of the tradition of political thought, Althusius has little to say about lower magistrates and administrative subordinates.)

First it is necessary to see who the ephors and supreme magistrates are and what they do. The ephors act as representatives of the people, establishing and ordering the administrative system. They represent the federal element in the realm, conceived as the *populus in corpus unum*. The supreme magistrate, by contrast, represents the *regnum*. To put it somewhat schematically: If the ephors represent the diversity-in-unity of the state, the supreme magistrate represents its unity-in-diversity (Winters, 1977, p. 43). The ephors are comparable to the ancient Roman tribunes or to the *Kürfürsten* (electors) in the Holy Roman Empire. They have to fulfill five tasks: to select the supreme magistrate, to control him (or her; Althusius is ambiguous about the possibility of females in this position; pp. 53, n. 6, 129, 131), to act as a trustee or regent in times of interregnum, to remove a tyrannical magistrate, and to defend the supreme magistrate against attacks by others (on Althusius’s *Ephorenlehre*, see Achterberg, 1988, pp. 500–504; Binetti, 2010). The supreme magistrate, in turn, is usually a king or a prince, but not necessarily so. In fact, there are several types of supreme magistracy: purely monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic types, and a mixed type (chap. 39). Althusius discusses at length the various activities that pertain to the supreme magistrate’s administration both of public functions and of things (chaps. 29–36) and of private things and persons (chap. 37). The former include, apart from an ecclesiastical role for the supreme magistrate, a wide range of secular functions, such as the enactment of laws and the administration of justice, censorship (and “inquisition”), the endeavor to preserve concord, the provision of means for procuring the advantages for social life, the convening of universal councils (comparable to parliaments), the care and handling of arms in times of peace and war, and the waging of war (see Pellegrini, 2010).

So there are many different tasks to be accomplished, or more precisely, there are many different goods, services, and especially rights of the realm to be administered. *Jus regni* is not a singular but a plural concept. The administration of these rights is entirely delegated by the people, and while some of

them are kept in the hands of the ephors, most of the others are again passed on to the supreme magistrate. This suits Althusius's view that there should always be one central power in a state, but that at the same time there can be many administrators: "This power of the realm (*potestas regni*), or of the associated bodies, is always one power; [there are] never many [of such powers], just as one soul and not many rules in the physical body. The administrators of this power can be many, so that individuals can each take on a share of the function of governing, but not the plenitude of power" (p. 71). Thus, the supreme magistrate (together with his subordinates) as well as the ephors is "doing administration," but none of them does the whole of it, and the former does it more directly and more extensively than the latter (for more about this role distribution, see Knöll, 2011, pp. 339, 371, 387).

In this connection, it is very important to note that for Althusius the administrators are not the possessors of the *jus regni*. Throughout his book, and again in opposition to Bodin, Althusius is anxious to emphasize that, while the supreme magistrate, in cooperation with the ephors, is allowed to exercise the rights of sovereignty, the rights themselves, and even the control over their administration, remain in the possession of the people: "For ownership of a realm belongs to the people, and administration of it to the king" (p. 66; see, e.g., p. 13). Magistrates administer something that is not their own; they are mandated (via the ephors) to act as trustees and stewards of the people. This mandate of administration is always conditional and may be revoked (Ingravalle, 2010, esp. p. 113). At the same time, the supreme magistrate is not a slave of the people, but stands over against the people and above the individual citizens, bearing his own responsibility. He is the chief administrator and has to show political leadership (Duso, 2002, pp. 26, 29). This leads us to our last question, namely *how* public administration has to be performed.

POLITICAL PRUDENCE

After a discussion of the election and inauguration (with a double oath) of the supreme magistrate, Althusius turns to the required qualities of that official. In chapters 21–27, he discusses extensively the requirements of the supreme magistrate to administer the commonwealth properly (see Behnen, 1984). What the supreme magistrate needs in particular, Althusius says, in congruence with Cicero, Seneca, and Lipsius (thus betraying a strong neostoic trace in his thinking; Behnen, 1984, pp. 433, 448; see Oestreich, 1982), can be captured briefly as "political prudence"—it is "political prudence, in which no administration of a magistrate ought to be lacking" (p. 135; see Figure 2).

For Althusius, prudence was above all *political* prudence ("*phronesis* als spezifisch politischer Tugend" [as a specifically political virtue]; Duso, 2002, p. 21) and definitely the virtue most needed in a political setting. At the same

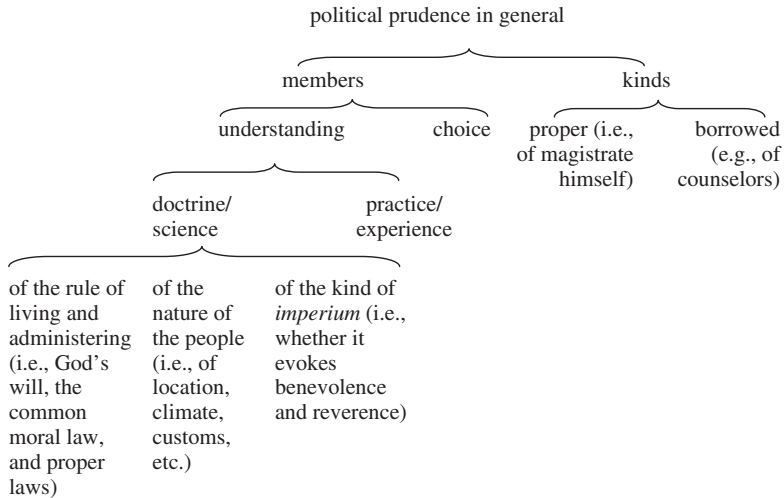


Figure 2. Althusius's Discussion of Prudence

Source: Adapted from Carney, 1995, pp. lviii–lix, 135–136, as well as Althusius, 1614/2003, p. 11.

time, political prudence is the “order and rule” (*ratio et regula*) of administration (p. 135). It consists of a cognitive and an active part, understanding (*intellectus*) and choice (*delectus*), of which the former is subdivided again in doctrine and practice. Although choice and practice seem obviously the most important parts of prudence (“he is rightly to be praised who is productive and useful to the commonwealth, not he who merely knows many things”; p. 138), Althusius shows his Calvinism by paying most attention to the doctrinal part. A supreme magistrate should above all have knowledge of “the rule of living and administering” (p. 135), that is, of God’s will as it is revealed to us in Scripture, particularly in the Decalogue, and of the positive laws (insofar, of course, as they do not contradict divine law). Next, he should also know about other relevant factors, such as the nature of the people and their attitudes (whether they accept and respect his rulership, and the like) as well as the nature of ruling itself.

With regard to the way in which administration should be conducted, Althusius’s discussion of tyranny is also important, because it provides a mirror image of our subject: “Tyranny is the contrary of just and upright administration” (p. 191). Thus, tyranny is for him not a particular form of government, as it was for many of the ancient authors, but a perverted kind of administration. Hence, he speaks of “tyranny, or the tyrannical administration of a commonwealth” (p. 192). As we have seen, Althusius holds that “administration is the bond by which the commonwealth holds together” (p.

92). Conversely, then, a tyrant “begins to shake the foundations and loosen the bonds of the associated body of the commonwealth” (p. 191). Administration of some kind does take place in a tyrannical government, but in a vicious and self-interested manner (McCulloch, 2006, pp. 491–492). In contrast to the virtuous magistrate, the tyrant regards the power to administer not as a mandated responsibility but as his own private possession (Ingravalle, 2010, p. 118; Quaglioni, 2010).

ALTHUSIUS’S RELEVANCE TODAY

After determining the place of administration in Althusius’s wider political thought, this article has explored three aspects of his administrative thought. First, we saw *what* administration actually amounts to for him. Defined in contrast with the concept of *communio* or *communicatio*, *administratio* is the activity of exercising the rights of the realm. It is not the direct delivery of public goods and services to citizens, nor merely the execution of laws, but the regulation and ordering of social functions that are necessary and useful for the maintenance of symbiotic life. Next, we saw *who* in the Althusian state performs this kind of administration. The administration of the many rights of the realm is handed over from the people to its representatives (the ephors), and thence in large part to the supreme magistrate. While the ephors still administer some of the rights of the realm (e.g., the election of the supreme magistrate), it is particularly the supreme magistrate, assisted of course by his subordinates, who does the actual administration. Finally, we have discussed *how* the administration has to be performed, namely guided by the virtue of political prudence, in congruence with both tables of the Decalogue, and taking into account other relevant aspects (human law, the nature of the people, their attitudes toward rulership, etc.).

At first sight, Althusius’s thought might seem not very relevant for the study of public administration in the twenty-first century. Although dichotomies are indeed often used in and perhaps even constitutive of our field, nobody uses Ramist logic today, and very few share Althusius’s Calvinist convictions. Indeed, many will be repelled by his theocratic ideas (and practices as a city administrator). Undeniably, Althusius’s thought is fundamentally at odds with important presuppositions of modern political and administrative thought (Duso, 2002; Ossewaarde, 2007). His belief in the ineradicable inequality of people, for instance, makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile his thought with the ideas of modern democracy and (popular) sovereignty (Duso, 2002, p. 33; *pace* Woldring, 1998). And his emphasis on the Ten Commandments as the most important guide for political and administrative decision-making flies in the face of contemporary ideals of government’s religious neutrality and the separation between church and state. The friendliest approach, adopted by many commentators, is therefore

to dismiss his thought as “an unstable compound of ancient and modern, of community and freedom” (Kieran, 2001).

More specifically, one could say that Althusius did not recognize a distinct study of public administration as such. In the prefaces to the different editions of his work, he made it very clear that he intended, in the *Politica*, to demarcate the study of *politics* from other fields, such as jurisprudence, theology, or philosophy (pp. 3–5, 12). It is in this context, the study of politics, that he discussed administration. And notwithstanding the central importance of administration in Althusius’s political thought (Knöll, 2011, p. 336), his Ramist method—so concerned with the demarcation of scholarly disciplines—did not lead him to the idea of public administration as a distinct field of study. Precisely because he regarded administration not as an institution (as *an* administration) but rather as an activity (as the administering *of*), it is always necessarily related to something else. This could be another reason why students of public administration have so far neglected him.

So we might wonder, with Duso (2010), why one should read Althusius today. I would answer that, even though Althusius had convictions that now seem controversial and did not speak directly to the discipline of public administration, he can nevertheless be regarded as an important precursor of our field and as a thinker who still has much to say. Not only his political thought, but also his administrative thought, is instructive for our contemporary situation. This situation, which is often described as one in which the sovereign, integrated, bureaucratically organized nation-state has “unraveled” and been replaced by a situation of complex, multilevel governance, especially in postwar Europe, seems particularly suitable for a serious reconsideration of Althusian ideas (Hüglin, 1980, p. 231; 2010, pp. 95–96, 100).

A second valuable characteristic of Althusius’s administrative thought is his appreciation of self-government through social associations. In this regard, he precedes Vincent and Elinor Ostrom’s otherwise very different understanding of public administration as the “art and science of association” (see their interview in Aligica & Boettke, 2009, p. 159). More generally, as Althusius does not want the government to take over the societal functions and perform them itself, his thought might very well suit the relatively recent transition from the “active” welfare state that directly provides its citizens with goods and services to the so-called enabling state: the kind of state that creates the conditions for others, whether in the market sphere or in civil society, to perform their own functions (Page & Wright, 2007; van der Meer, 2009).

Third, Althusius’s emphasis on the need for prudence, although an element of moral philosophy from Plato onward, has only recently become part of the moral discourse in public administration, as some have started to underline explicitly the need for administrative prudence, or *phronesis* (e.g., Morgan, 1990; Nieuwenburg, 2003). This aspect makes Althusius’s work interesting for those in public administration who work on virtue ethics. In that literature, the

idea that the opposite of virtuous (prudent) administration can be conceived of as *tyranny* is rarely encountered, but deserves deeper reflection. It gives administrative ethics a seriousness that it does not often have today.

Last, Althusius's understanding of public administration is remarkably constitutionalist, that is, legitimated and limited by law. Entrusted to "public servants" by the people in order to serve the people, it has to be moderate and accountable. Public administration for him serves, as Knöll has emphasized, as "a bulwark against absolutism" and a central element of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* (2011, pp. 337, 370). This point is obviously also relevant today and connects well with ideas of the "Constitutional School" emerging in public administration in recent years (Newbold, 2010). For these four reasons, I believe that Althusius is worth listening to, not only for political theorists, but also for students of public administration (or will be as soon as we are ready to question some of our modern ideas and ideals, or at least willing to temporarily bracket our suspicion of a thinker who questions them; Duso, 2010, p. 94).

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