COMMENTARY

Making Public Administration great again

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ABSTRACT
Recently a new discourse emerged in policy sciences and public administration under the label of “Positive Public Administration” (PPA), emphasizing a focus on “positive” governmental and policy successes. It positions itself as a renewed attempt to move away from an overemphasis on criticism, declinist discourse, and negative language, presenting itself as vital for reviving the field.

Deconstructing PPA allows us to engage with a growing debate about “positivity” both inside and outside academia, and to discuss its novelty in public administration and policymaking. This commentary discusses this scholarly ambition by critically reviewing its historical traces, current ambitions, and strategic claims of PPA as discourse. This contribution shows that if PPA is a renewed attempt, it is a renewed attempt to reinforce “traditional” arguments and instrumental knowledge production. Moreover, PPA will not create a way out, but only a new way into traditional problems that have haunted PA as a field for decades.

It would seem relevant […] to reflect more self-critically on the foundations of the field (Schillemans 2020, 419)

1. Introduction
Recently, a call for positivity has been haunting public administration research (Douglas et al. 2019; Douglas, Steen, and van der Wal 2019; Compton et al. 2022). Under the name of “Positive” Public Administration (PPA), this call seems to gain traction. Moving away from “failures” and “crisis” and turning our attention to positive thinking about policy and administration, PPA does not stand on its own. In several branches of Public Administration (PA)\textsuperscript{1} and policy sciences, positive approaches can be observed. For example, successful governmental actions (Marsh and McConnell 2010; Compton and ’t Hart 2019; Luetjens, Mintrom, and ’t Hart 2019) in regulatory
excellence (Coglianese 2016), successful governance (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014; Emerson and Nabatchi 2015; Page et al. 2015; Cristofoli, Meneguzzo, and Riccucci 2017), and successful HRM (van der Wal 2017).

Despite the variance, it shows a wide range of protagonists of governmental actions. It relates to other disciplinary “turns” and approaches, such as positive psychology, positive organizational studies, and positive evaluation. In a similar vein, PPA scholars aim to “understand positive outcomes and how they may arise.” With an appeal to notions of “positive” and “positivity,” scholars state that research on “public programs (...) thrive, embody and protect important democratic values and produce widely valued societal outcomes. It means a ‘focus’ on positive contributions of governments and governance” (Douglas et al. 2019, 3–6). A focus on policy successes is needed “to shift the focus to what goes well” (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019, 2). PPA, then, seems to be a call for action and a clear plea to “develop a more nuanced and thus better understanding of what makes democratic systems of governance [...] work well” and to explore the “bright side” of governmental actions (Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019; Compton et al. 2022). In this commentary, we aim to understand the contributions, limitations, and novelty of this approach to the field of public administration.

Every now and then scholarly fields introduce new perspectives or “turns” (Hirsch and Levin 1999; Alford and O’Flynn 2009). We have seen a “mobility turn” in migration studies, the “argumentative turn” in policy studies, and the “local turn” in peace-building. So, why bother with a new appeal? We took the initiative for this commentary for at least three reasons. Firstly, by analyzing PPA we do not solely discuss PPA. We sense that the core principles of this appeal resonate within the broader field of public administration, in a variety of ways. PPA has an idealist appeal and narrative that speaks to the broader field, as stated:

Our commitment here is ambitious and perhaps even idealistic. Positive public administration demands not only epistemological and methodological renewal, but also a repositioning of public administration experts in society. The goal is an administrative science that can tell a broader and richer story about the added value of government, in addition to the existing insights into failures (Douglas, Steen, and van der Wal 2019, 6).

This ambition to speak to the general field of public administration also speaks to us as authors. Secondly, and related, this is not an isolated scholarly act. The plea for more positive approaches has been introduced on several occasions (edited volumes, journals, conference keynotes, workshops) by various authors in different institutes around the world, granted by international research institutes (ERC), and supported by respected colleagues in the field (Douglas et al. 2019). As such, this is not a marginal practice or lone wolf exercise but has broader resonance within the field. PPA as an emerging discourse in public administration, therefore, requires attention. Thirdly, this “positive” appeal stands on the shoulders of other positive turns in related disciplines (such as psychology) and therefore it has broader scientific significance to understand its relevance. And because of its more general appeal, this commentary reflects on what “positive” exactly means in relation to public administration and what PPA could entail for public administration research more broadly. Therefore, we address the following question:

How can we understand the current rise of and appeal to Positive Public Administration (PPA)?
This commentary first briefly situates PPA historically, in terms of its academic assumptions and commitments (Bovens, ‘t Hart, and Peters 2002; Marsh and McConnell 2010; van der Wal 2017; Douglas et al. 2019; Compton and ‘t Hart 2019; Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019). This allows us to understand to what extent PPA resonates with the intellectual legacy of public administration. In our focus, we are deliberately selective. Because despite the broad resonance and support by different scholars all around the world, we focus on the more manifested initiatives. These are articulated mainly by (networks of) Dutch scholars. Such an illustrative focus is legitimate since the Dutch context has relevance to the international scholarly practice of PA. As articulated by the most recent research international review committee of Dutch Public Administration departments: “The academic field of public administration in the Netherlands has a well-deserved international reputation – for its quality, its productivity and for its pioneering of new frontiers in public administration theory, empirical research and methodologies” (Hartley et al. 2021, 9). This provides international relevance to discussing frontiers of novel ideas and methodologies emerging in the Netherlands and beyond. Second, we zoom in on how PPA is discursively legitimated, to explore the claimed novelty of PPA. Finally, this commentary argues that PPA will not create a way out, but only a new way into traditional and intellectual problems that have haunted PA as a discipline. We think this deserves attention because only a deliberative intellectual debate refines our thinking about core assumptions of the field and improves the practice of policy design and practitioners.

2. What’s new? Historicizing PPA

Let us first assess the need for a more positive appeal. Where does this call come from and what are the assumptions behind it? In other words, how can we situate this attempt in the field of public administration? For that aim, we look at how PPA scholars have manifested themselves in previous publications, such as the article in this journal (Douglas et al. 2021). In such contributions, PPA authors position themselves as:

Not a new disciplinary ambition but a reformulation of the classic ambition of the field. In Wilson’s (1887) seminal paper the objective of the study of administration is to “discover (…) what government can properly and successfully do (…) with the utmost possible efficiency”. However, in a social and political climate of overbearing, if not venomous, criticism of government, there is a great urgency to revisit this classic disciplinary ambition and systematically focus on positive contributions of governments and governance (Douglas et al. 2019, 3).

Therefore, PPA is “not new but a reformulation” of the classic ambition of the field. Elsewhere, PPA scholars explicitly position their “positive ambition” by:

Terming it positive public administration we aim to follow in the footsteps of movements toward positive scholarship in related disciplines and seek to explicate and strengthen our focus on what we should do as in ours: contributing to the quality of democratic government and effective public governance (Douglas et al. 2021, 6).
By referring to Woodrow Wilson, PPA scholars aim to "contributing to the quality of democratic government and effective public governance." It is interpreted as the "classic ambition" of our field, or as Goodnow stated:

[Administration] is unconnected with politics because it embraces fields of semi-scientific (...) work which has little if any influence on the expression of the true state will. (...). Such a force should be free from the influence of politics because of the fact that their mission is the exercise of foresight and discretion, the pursuit of truth (…) (Goodnow 1900, 85).

Historically, the domain of "administration" was conceptualized as a rationalized contradiction to politics, intended to be value-neutral, and scientifically based, with bureaucracies as its primary organizational structures (Overeem 2005). Administration became a technocratic and scientific instrument of "neutral" and apolitical state formation (see also Overeem 2005, 2008). For example, the first Dutch professor of Public Administration (1928) van Poelje formulated that public administration had to learn "how to best organize and lead the public service (...) as the science of caring for the interests of the citizen and society, by the public administration" (van Poelje 1964, 1–23). Not surprisingly, public administration became constituted on these rationalized and scientific ideas of Wilson and Goodnow. In the Netherlands, for instance, PA was increasingly connected to national myths of water management which demands rational and consensual conflict resolution and a cooperative spirit (Noordegraaf, Brandsen, and Huitema 2006).

However, this rationalist approach to administration was strongly criticized from within the field in postwar debates. The demythologization of Wilson was characterized by studies of the administration of politics and the politicization of administration (Appleby 1949; Waldo 1984; Rosenbloom 1983). Waldo stated that "administrative study (...) is at its heart normative" (Waldo 1984, 168–176), while Wildavsky (1979) showed that "every policy analysis is a political activity" (Korsten and Toonen 1988, 370). Similarly, Dahl had an eye for the normative values in every administrative scientist (Korsten and Toonen 1988, 147). These critiques were not without consequences and caused disciplinary doubt. If everything is political, and the concept of administration offers hardly any conceptual distinction, to what extent is an administrative science still possible? How legitimate does this scientific project actually remain? Such criticism eroded the legitimacy of the discipline and caused an "identity crisis" of PA (Waldo 1968, 2; Caiden 1971) which gave rise to thorough self-reflection. It resulted, for example, in the Minnowbrook conferences in the wake of social turmoil that flared up in the 1960s. These conferences explored a so-called "New Public Administration," moving away from rationalism and efficiency, while focusing on values and societal goals. But, while the first Minnowbrook conference involved a revaluation of its normative foundations, the participants of the second Minnowbrook conference avoided "explicit discussions on the normative level" (Rutger, 98). This resulted in a crisis of its self-image and legitimacy (O’Leary, Van Slyke, and Kim 2011). It was clear that public administration needed a way out. This resulted, for example in The Netherlands, in a new ideal described as "pragmatic morality" (Noordegraaf, Brandsen, and Huitema 2006). More broadly speaking, it led to the creation of two pillars: knowledge integration and applicability (Brasz, Kleijn, and In ‘t Veld 1962). A renewed emphasis on
policy practice and applicability created renewed legitimacy for a discipline in doubt (van Ostaijen 2016). In the following section, we explore the position and function of disciplinary knowledge in relation to PPA.

2.1. Instrumental knowledge and pragmatic morality

After the first and second World-Wars, it became especially clear that Enlightened ideas about scientific progress and rationalization resulted in great achievements. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) argued that modern forms of rationality and reason had to be critically investigated. For them, rising fascism and capitalist society were the main problems of modernity, but the procedural and bureaucratic realization of the Holocaust and destructive powers of administrative rationality were also detrimental to humanity. More specifically, Frankfurt scholars observed a spread of instrumental reason rooted in material forms of production and administration as the main problem of modernity. In their view, instrumental knowledge, foundational to highly modernized states, was problematic since “the liberating force of technology—the instrumentalization of things—turns into a fetter of liberation; the instrumentalization of man [sic]” (Marcuse 1991, 159). Frankfurters, such as Horkheimer, argued that “positivist social science” is part of a conservative ambition in which instrumental knowledge contributes to “traditional theory.” This “technical and instrumental knowledge” can mainly be seen as knowledge about the means of states and societies, and knowledge of puzzle solving or problem-solving.” According to Burawoy (2005), such instrumental knowledge is particularly productive for the benefit of (state) powers. As a consequence, this will produce “useable” knowledge to maintain the social order and conserve “reality as it is.” As such, a further rationalization and technocratization of states and societies become the basic legitimation of instrumental knowledge which for others has resulted in a “mainstream, contemporary social sciences, which, for all intents and purposes, remains an essentially a-critical and politically affirmative intellectual enterprise” (Thompson 2017, 232). Now, if we return to the “pragmatic morality” of post-war public administration, we can mainly understand this as geared toward instrumental ends (use-value) rather than reflexive ends (critical value). We can think of many contemporary examples such as design theory, problem-based research, challenge-based education, and evidence-based policymaking which have entered the field of public administration recently (Hermus, van Buuren, and Bekkers 2020). This focus on and function of instrumental knowledge is an important legacy that historically characterizes the field of PA (Koppenjan 2022).

Let us now turn our focus to how this relates to PPA. In the following section we analyze PPA discursively (Macleod 2002; Custer, Deutscher, and Haddad 2016) questioning its intellectual legacies (as briefly discussed before). Therefore, we will not only examine its knowledge claims but also its socio-political implications and relations to historical and present power regimes (Hook 2005). A concise deconstructive mode of inquiry, in addition, focuses more specifically on how the discourse of PPA presents itself, its main concepts and commitments, while highlighting its limits, blind spots, hierarchies, and contradictions (Burman and MacLure 2005; Thomassen 2010).
3. Unpacking PPA as discourse

This section unpacks key aspects of PPA, in particular, the discursive legitimation of (1) policy successes, (2) positivity, and (3) positive research. In doing so, we build on the concept of discursive legitimation. This refers to how actors discursively justify “ideas, concepts and categorizations” and “actions” as a set of practices (Hajer 1997; Fisher and Gottweis 2012). “Legitimation” is conceptualized as the creation of a sense of understandable, necessary, or acceptable actions in a specific setting. In that regard, “discursive legitimation” is defined as a key discursive technique that justifies social activity and involves providing “good reasons, grounds, or acceptable motivations for past or present action” (van Dijk 1997; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999; van Leeuwen 2007; Vaara and Tienar 2008; Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2009; Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö 2004).

3.1. Discursive legitimation of policy successes

Firstly, PPA sets out a conceptual agenda to “develop conceptualizations of ‘good governance’ that are not just couched in a procedural and process terms but also encompass its substantive, material, and psychological impacts” (Douglas et al. 2019). This focus on policy successes is needed “to shift the focus to what goes well” (Douglas et al. 2019, 2). Therefore, we start with the evaluative part, how PPA meets this agenda by studying their operationalization of “success, failure” and moreover how “success should be understood” (Douglas et al. 2019; Compton and ‘t Hart 2019). They provide an assessment scheme in which programmatic, process, and political assessment criteria are included, through which “great” or “complete policy successes” can be recognized (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019). Key conceptions or proxies of successes are, for instance, “effectiveness, performance, reliability, reputation, public value, or legitimacy” (Douglas et al. 2019, 6). This allows for a clear and transparent assessment of how successes and failures should be understood and compared, because:

Policy successes are, like policy failures, in the eye of the beholder. They are not mere facts but stories. Undoubtedly ‘events’—real impacts on real people—are a necessary condition for their occurrence. But in the end, policy successes do not so much occur as they are made. To claim that a public policy, program, or project X is a ‘success’ is effectively an act of interpretation, indeed of framing. To say this in a public capacity and in a public forum makes it an inherently political act: it amounts to giving a strong vote of confidence to certain acts and practices of governance. In effect it singles them out, elevates them, validates them. For such an act to be consequential, it needs to stick: others must be convinced (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019, 3).

But when we take a closer look at how the authors assess policy successes, it goes beyond the factuality of their criteria (Bovens, ‘t Hart, and Peters 2002; Marsh and McConnell 2010; Compton and ‘t Hart 2019; Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019). Marsh and McConnell (2010) also see this difficulty arguing that “some would claim policy success to be nothing more than a social construct reflecting power relations and therefore it is important to develop a dialogue to create different indicators of success” (Marsh and McConnell 2010, 570). But, even with clear indicators, it is not factual but
a social process of claim-making. It is a “sticky” story and “an inherently political act,” that needs to be told and validated recurrently:

For such an act to be consequential, it needs to stick: others must be convinced of its truth and they need to emulate it. The claim ‘X is a success’ needs to become a more widely accepted and shared narrative. When it does, it becomes performative: X looks better and better because so many say so, so often (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019, 3; Compton, Luetjens, and ‘t Hart 2019).

This shows that the position and function of PPA knowledge are explicitly understood as part of a performative and “inherent” political act of telling and validating “successful” stories of governmental action. Metrics for policy success, as instrumental discursive objects, play a crucial role in foregrounding what governments do “properly.” Therefore, PPA claims about policy success can be understood as a political act. This resonates with others arguing that “policy evaluation is an inherently normative act” (Bovens, ‘t Hart, and Kuipers 2006, 319) and “it is only a slight exaggeration to say, paraphrasing Clausewitz, that policy evaluation is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means” (Bovens, ‘t Hart, and Kuipers 2006, 321). Moreover, the authors argue that defining success and failure is eventually “in the eye of the beholder.”

Therefore, deconstructing policy successes allows us to observe PPA as an “inherent normative and political act.” Moreover, since success is defined as the art of telling and validating positive “sticky” stories of governmental action, PPA shows what is exactly “inherent” about its political agenda. By focusing on their “conceptual starting points” we can better understand the academic knowledge position and function of PPA as strongly tending toward an affirmative and instrumental endeavor.

3.2. Discursive legitimation of positivity and positive research

Next to its emphasis on successes, PPA argues why this particular knowledge production is urgently needed. Let us first reconstruct the arguments. At the outset, it is clear that PPA aims to “contribute to the quality of government” and this needs a “renewed awareness.” By “pursuing a positive public administration research agenda challenges us to overcome negativity bias in the way people perceive, evaluate, and study government and governance” (Douglas et al. 2021). Apparently, this is needed because “in the current public and academic discourse, in which citizens and public servants are persuaded to understand government and governance in overly and almost exclusively negative terms” (Douglas et al. 2019, 4). This has urgency against the background of “a social and political climate of overbearing, if not venomous, criticism of government” (Douglas et al. 2019, 3). It would then legitimize a focus on policy successes since:

Negative language dominates: public and academic discourse about government, politics, and public policy is dominated by disappointment, incompetence, failure, unintended consequences, alienation, corruption, disenchantment, and crisis [….] the current ascent of ‘antisystem’ populists speaks volumes, and the message is hardly reassuring. The ‘declinist’ discourse of the current age has permeated our thinking about government and public policy. It prevents us from seeing, acknowledging, and learning from past and present instances of highly effective and highly valued public policymaking (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019, 2; Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019, 3).
PPA explicitly questions whether “popular sovereignty and orderly transition of power” is sufficient to address contemporary problems. They argue that we need more “intelligent public problem-solving” which requires studying successes and smart management (Compton et al. 2022, 51). Moreover, public administration is in dire need of a more positive assessment, which:

Swims against the currents of skepticism, negativism and disillusionment with politics and government that beset many nations today. It looks purposefully at the ‘bright side’ of public policy in Australia and New Zealand, and provides detailed case studies of instances in which governments by and large got it right and made positive differences to the lives and wellbeing of countless citizens, to the strength of their economies and, sometimes, to their country’s standing in the world (Luetjens, Mintrom, and ‘t Hart 2019, vii).

This is important because PPA expresses that not only populist appeals are taking over democracy (ontological claim) but anti-system thinking also corrupts the way how scholars assess governmental actions (epistemological claim). Therefore, PPA is presented as the legitimate “answer” to this “negative language,” ultimately “to overcome negativity bias.” This even leads up to a plea about what other PA scholars should be doing:

We are looking for a perspective that can, and in our view must, nuance the dominant negative feelings in society towards the government and, in our view, should be nuanced because overly negative sentiments towards the public sector among citizens has problematic consequences. As public administration experts, we are obliged to produce and communicate such empirical and robust nuance (Douglas, Steen, and van der Wal 2019, 6).

Therefore, it appeals to the broader field of PA with a moral obligation to “nuance dominant negative feelings toward government” which we, as public administration scholars, “should nuance.” Let us turn our focus to how PPA legitimates these appeals.

The turn to “positivity” is a rhetorical move away from a “focus on the dark side of government and governance” (Douglas et al. 2019, 3). We need to avoid “stinging criticism of government” because – so goes the argument – “negative language dominates” (Compton and ‘t Hart, 2019, 2). It is a discursive strategy of mythopoiesis, a strategy to legitimate itself based on moral and cautionary tales, relating to the past, present, or future (van Leeuwen 2007; Vaara and Tienar 2008; Joutsenvirta and Vaara 2009; Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö 2004). The cautionary tale is quite clear, based on a “story of decline” (Stone 1988) of “negative terms,” disappointment, and negativity. The discourse of PPA legitimates itself with clear declinist rhetoric. But as a discipline and field, we have progressed and can look beyond such stories of decline. Besides, a “dark side” can only be contrasted by an “Enlightened” or “bright” side, which coincidentally now turns out to be PPA. And the discursive opposite of positive PA is “negative” public administration.

Moreover, PPA holds itself discursively together by a set of distinctions and oppositions, such as positive/negative, bright/dark side, and constructive/critical. What is crucial here, is that these oppositions are hierarchically structured. It is emblematic of what PPA really is about: a conservative plea and “inherent political act” toward more traditional, affirmative, and instrumental PA knowledge production. We consider this
as a rather romantic, nostalgic, and regressive turn to the past and the inability to actually innovate public administration as a field. Therefore, PPA is anything but a renewed attempt to revisit the discipline, which some authors even admit since: “positive public administration is not a breach from tradition” (Douglas et al. 2019). However, it is narrated as if this is something new, against “declinist discourse” and “to overcome negativity bias.”

With Horkheimer, we argue that this expresses a conservative ambition in which instrumental knowledge mainly contributes to traditional theory. This can be considered as a disciplinary (auto-immunization) strategy of PA as a knowledge system since social systems do not immunize themselves against their negation, but “by means of and with the help of their negation” (Luhmann 1995). Literately, PPA makes use of its negation (“negative” language and research) to immunize public administration as a tradition of instrumental knowledge production. Thus, PPA can be understood as a plea for “traditional theory” by means of positioning it against “negative” and “biased” research. But negative PA research does not exist. And it also should not exist, just like positive PA. It is at its best an oxymoron, since there is no such thing as negative PA research. Moreover, this is intellectually a rather shallow claim. Alternatively, if there is a dichotomy, then there is one between instrumental, affirmative and traditional knowledge versus reflexive and critical knowledge. The above arguments show why and how PPA can be considered as another attempt to further instrumentalize public administration as a field. And as such, “[p]ositive public administration [...] remains trapped in a one-dimensional, quasi-neutral and instrumentalist spectrum with two extremes: success and failure” (Trommel 2019, 60). If PPA needs to be a “story to stick,” it is not a sticky story.

4. Concluding remarks

After reviewing PPA, we can conclude that it does not solve the problem it seeks to address. Instead, and rather ironic, PPA even enlarges the problem. In that sense, PPA is another upheaval which – recurrently – deepens the already existing crisis of a discipline in doubt (Korsten and Toonen 1988; Rutger; Appleby 1949; Waldo 1984; Rosenbloom 1983). Illustratively, public administration has moved in the direction of behavioral sciences and positive psychology more recently (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017; Gopalan and Pirog 2017; James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017). This shift seeks to innovate the field through problem-solving capacity (by design theory), methodological innovation (by randomized experiments), positivist rigor (by Behavioral Public Administration), and positive assessment (by PPA). By staying within the instrumental confines of traditional public administration knowledge production, such innovations will often remain “revolutions from above.” We might even need to understand Positive public administration not as a new “umbrella concept” (Hirsch and Levin 1999; Alford and O’Flynn 2009), but as a “summative unit” (Dubin 1978) that has:

Strength that they can mean a great deal; at the same time, they are ill-defined or unspecified. As an element of theory, they do not provide enough guidance to render clear research approaches. As a tool for empirical research, they are insufficiently specific to render clear conclusions (Hirsch and Levin 1999, 210).
More specifically, we showed how PPA operates as a summative unit since it will not create a way out, but an unspecified new way into the traditional problems that historically have haunted public administration for a long time. Therefore, PPA will not solve but amplify this intellectual crisis.

Moreover, and slightly different than positive psychology, the turn to “positivity” in PA research is particularly problematic in a democratic sense when it comes to the practice of policymaking. For. Firstly, what can be considered positive to public administration assumes that scholars are able to know what is best for democracies and can speak for and stand outside the democratic realm to assess what “should be seen as complete success”6. But especially in the realm of liberal democracies, it is impossible to assess and evaluate policy from “outside” democracies, since liberal democracies are de facto totalitarian since no one can realistically be “against democracy,” without being anti-democratic (Schinkel 2010). This is because democracies are always “in the making, forever incomplete and founded in possibilities” as Maxine Greene stated. They are “to come,” and characterized by fundamental uncertainty since democracies “have no Archimedean vantage point” (Derrida 2004; Lefort 2010; Schinkel 2010). Any attempt to claim “complete successes” actually depoliticizes what is in the realm of democratic assessment. In democracies, the question of “whose success” always remains (Marsh and McConnell 2010, 575). As such, public administration scholars are not in the position to claim policy successes. This is not only an important scholarly consideration but also relates to practice. If we remain ill-reflexive about democratic limitations regarding success, it could contribute to even more frustration by what practitioners might expect from public administration knowledge and theory. Too much fixation on the “bright” and “positive” side of governmental actions, could add up to even higher expectations and tragic results. However, that is hopefully not the end of this story. Let this commentary be a starting point of a true reflexive conversation about the intellectual premises of the field and how more reflexive accounts could create more realistic guidelines for policy design and practice.

And let us push the boundaries for what policy practice could truly benefit from. Because more promising than a positive or negative public administration is a provoking public administration (Trommel 2019). A scientific endeavor that does not stop at the institutional border, or merely innovates instrumental knowledge production rhetorically. Rather, let it be a field that dares to defamiliarize practitioners, scholars, and students and with the current boundaries of policy thinking, the capacity to unfold public interests and dare to imagine new frontiers of statehood. This is particularly relevant for policy design and practice. Because we think that particularly practitioners, civil servants, and street-level bureaucrats are not served with democratically ill-informed knowledge. Instead, practitioners could particularly profit from public administration scholars who contest, confront, and provoke comfortable knowledge. Instead of – again – reemphasizing instrumental knowledge, novel research shows for instance the importance of reflexive knowledge that enables particularly policy practitioners to rethink conflict and contestation as important elements of dedication, affection, and loyalty to the democratic and public sphere (Verloo 2015; Wolf and van Dooren 2018; Wolf 2021). Several branches of the field show, for example, the importance of not shunning but engaging with dissatisfied citizens expressing “not-in-my-backyard” behavior.
This could evolve into a “stand-up” public administration, that *stands up against and with* policy practitioners to address the publicness of public issues, which is urgently needed because “a public version of public administration still needs to be developed” (Schillemans 2020, 419). The field is in dire need of such public and reflexive knowledge, against the instrumental and traditional confines which have haunted the discipline for decades (van Ostaijen and Jhagroe 2020). Such reflexive knowledge aims to unravel the contradictions within, which already exist “to make insights evident of what we take as given to our social world.” We propose an engaged form of academic and democratic knowledge production that moves beyond simplified negativity/positivity schemes. It is also “a form of thinking that is designed not only to comprehend, but also to transform: its purpose is to change not only our knowledge of the objective world (…) but simultaneously the nature of the subject in a practical sense” (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019). Therefore, *provoking* our public and scholarly imagination against common sense is urgently needed, since what is common regularly does not make much sense (Schinkel 2010). It is this *outvitation* that could create an answer to the knowledge instrumentality that is still haunting public administration as a field. Such a provoking way out could pave a promising road for a common and engaging future, for practitioners and scholars alike.

**Notes**

1. We use the abbreviation of PA as common denominator of different fields such as administrative sciences, policy sciences and studies.
2. Many dualisms or typologies of knowledge types are based on the classic difference between the *ends* or the *means* to reach those ends, which relates to Weber’s distinction between technical and value rationality. Weber, followed by Horkheimer and Adorno, was concerned that technical rationality was supplanting value rationality.
3. Lazarsfeld makes the distinction between what he termed “administrative” and “critical” research. Administrative research is a kind of social analysis that was concerned with variation and behaviour within an established social system. Critical research aims to develop “a theory of the prevailing social trends of our times, general trends which yet require consideration in any concrete research problem; and it seems to imply ideas of basic human values according to which all actual or desired effects should be appraised” (Lazarsfeld 1941, 9).
4. “A policy is a complete success to the extent that (a) it demonstrably creates widely valued social outcomes; through (b) design, decision-making, and delivery processes that enhance both its problem-solving capacity and its political legitimacy; and (c) sustains this performance for a considerable period of time, even in the face of changing circumstances” (Compton and ‘t Hart 2019, 5).

**Disclosure statement**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare and this work was not supported by any funding.

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