Interview of *Think Tanks in America* author Tom Medvetz

Elizabeth Popp Berman

Elizabeth Popp Berman: Thanks for agreeing to talk to SKAT about your brand new book, *Think Tanks* in America. The main argument of *Think Tanks* is that over the past forty years, think tanks have become the main institutions linking intellectual life and politics in the United States. The book also claims that, by creating a new space of action at the intersection of politics, academia, the media, and business, think tanks derive much of their power from their ability to mediate between the forms of "capital" used in different fields, not from having a distinct form of "capital" (to use Bourdieu's language, which the book draws upon). Yet in doing this—in juggling the competing demands of research, PR skill, business connections, and political savvy—think tanks have made themselves indispensable for anyone who wants to use ideas to shape policy. Furthermore, other kinds of intellectuals are required to engage with the "space of think tanks" in order to participate in political life.

So why think tanks? What led you to this topic in the first place?

Tom Medvetz: This is a great question to open with, first, because you offer a nice summary of the book's argument, and second, because the process of choosing the topic undoubtedly shaped my focus on certain aspects of the "think tank phenomenon" over others. Broadly speaking, the opposition between inductive and deductive approaches is relevant here: Whereas some scholars set out from an interest in a specific case (and then have to figure out exactly what it's a case of), others start with a more abstract query (and then must locate an efficient empirical anchor for the study). With respect to this opposition, I took the latter approach. In classic "Berkeley" fashion, I started with some big theoretical questions about the political role of intellectuals, which led to even broader questions such as, "What does it mean to be an 'intellectual' in the first place?" I was also interested in symbolic power—or the capacity to impose meaning—and its role in politics. Finally, once I'd decided to focus on the United States (which was largely for pragmatic reasons), it became impossible to ignore major questions about the role of money in politics and the complex workings of the media.

I landed on the topic of think tanks, then, because they seemed like a good linchpin for addressing all of these concerns at once. At the same time, it quickly became clear that think tanks had been sorely neglected by other scholars. (In the book, I suggest an explanation for this pattern of omission.) Given the overall direction of my reasoning, I was sometimes tempted to joke with people that I didn't really care about think tanks per se—only the power relations in which they were embedded. This is indeed the book's main concern, but ultimately I realized it would be a mistake to "miss the trees for the forest" by neglecting the uniqueness and specificity of think tanks.

EPB: The book opens with the story of Charles Murray—of *Losing Ground and The Bell Curve* fame—whose career mirrors and illustrates the rise of think tanks. You did some 45 interviews as part of your research, and have some great quotes from figures like Murray, Alice Rivlin, and Grover Norquist. Do any of the interviews stand out as particularly memorable for you?

TM: Certainly, and for various reasons. First, some interviews sensitized me to an important point about intellectuals. Put simply, it was the respondents with the most colorful personalities (e.g. Murray, Clyde Prestowitz, Fred Smith, Jr., Dean Baker, Eric Alterman) who allowed me to shed my commonsense view of "intellectuals" as lofty, ethereal beings whose ideas emerged pristinely, almost out of nowhere. Against my first impulses, I became determined to portray my research subjects as real, flesh-and-blood human beings, rather than give them the privilege normally granted intellectuals, which is to be depicted as unearthly creatures. Concretely, this meant using a quasi-journalistic mode of writing and quoting them extensively to capture the flavor of their speech (and without deleting the "ums," "likes" and "you knows").

Second, some of the interviews—particularly those with Paul Weyrich (who has since passed away), Grover Norquist, Charles Murray, and Josh Marshall—stood out for the sheer irreplaceability of the subjects. As you point out in reference to Murray, however, even the most historically unique people represent social forces and relations beyond themselves. Third, a few of the interviews stand out vividly in my mind because of the magnanimousness of the respondents themselves. On this count, Steve Clemons, Karlyn Bowman, and Bruce Stokes deserve special mention. And finally, some—and here I'll decline to name names—functioned as reminders that there are norms of courtesy and respect that transcend, or in any case operate separately from, political attitudes. This is my euphemistic way of saying that some of my "favorite" interview subjects were people with whom I disagreed the most politically, and vice versa. I make this point with an analogous analytic idea in mind: Just as it's possible to separate political from personal judgments, it's also possible to separate political from social scientific judgments. This is why I'd insist that the study—although one could imagine it being used as a "weapon" in the political field—has no political bias per se. Put simply, it's built out of social scientific rather than political "materials."

EPB: Probably the most provocative claim you make is that the rise of think tanks has relegated intellectuals who are independent of think tanks—by which you primarily, though not exclusively, mean academics—to the margins of political life. As someone who studies universities, I see academics as anything but independent, although they have an entirely different set of constraints than think tank folks. Can you speak a bit more about what you think academics might bring to the world of policy if think tanks were less dominant?

TM: Yes, but first there's a tricky conceptual issue embedded in this question because there are at least two meanings of the word independent—and it's important not to conflate them. On the one side, there's the everyday term, meaning "detached from" (often with the implication that the separation in question is total

or absolute). However, this isn't what I mean by the term. Instead, I use the term independent in a relational sense to mean "obeying a distinctive logic or principle." Clearly, this is a Bourdieu-inspired usage.

A sharp reader might point out that "distinctiveness" is itself always relative. (I'm thinking of an article by Michael Schudson about Bourdieu's concept of autonomy called "Autonomy From What?") But typically, when we speak about intellectuals, the forms of "relative independence" that are the most pertinent are independence from economic, political, and cultural constraints. That is to say, to be independent is to be able to reach conclusions that aren't driven by material considerations (e.g. subsistence needs, the lust for profit, etc.); fear of state repression or coercion from powerful groups; or popular customs, conventions, or tastes. So when I say that the rise of think tanks over the last four decades has marginalized more "autonomous" intellectuals from political life, I make no assumption that academic scholars are immune from this process or inherently more autonomous. Instead, I think these questions have to be treated as empirical ones.

A key argument in the book—and, admittedly, one I would have liked to develop further—is that the rise of think tanks has introduced new pressures on social researchers, including academic scholars, to subordinate their work to political, economic, and cultural demands. Yet these pressures don't have uniform effects, and many social scientists remain relatively insulated from them. However—and this is the key twist—my point is that research carried out under conditions of high autonomy is increasingly relegated to the margins of public debate. The counterfactual you raised was what if think tanks simply didn't exist? The answer, I think, is that because the competitors vying to shape political debate would be fewer, more autonomous intellectuals would likely have a greater ability to influence those debates.

EPB: One theoretical aim of the book is to explore the workings of a field of action—the "space of think tanks"—that is defined by its relation to other fields more than by an internal logic of its own. Do you think this is one example of a more general phenomenon, or is there something unique about the space of think tanks?

TM: Doubtless it's not a unique phenomenon. I think the best way to illustrate this is simply by citing some of the impressive social scientific work being done about other "interstitial" spaces (although many of them do not use this terminology). Off the top of my head, I would cite Gil Eyal, both on the cultural meaning of autism and the history of Israeli expertise in "Arab affairs" (not to mention his theoretical paper, "The Spaces Between Fields"); S.M. Amadae on the history of "systems analysis"; Sarah Babb on multilateral development banks; Stephanie Mudge on the history of the European Union; Lisa Stampnitzky on the growth of "terrorism expertise"; Aaron Panofsky on genetic testing; Charles Camic on Bourdieu's "two sociologies of knowledge"; and John Levi Martin on field theory. All of these scholars—and certainly others I haven't mentioned—have written insightfully about hybrid, overlapping, or interstitial spaces of action.

EPB: Your book speaks most directly to the "K" in SKAT (i.e. knowledge), but I wonder if you think it also has things to say to section members who are primarily oriented toward the sociology of science.

TM: Yes, I hope the book contains some ideas that will be of interest to sociologists of science. One of the most important involves the tricky concept of "independence." I would like the book to help clarify the distinction between scientific autonomy—by which I mean the ability of scientists to enforce positive standards of rigor and competence within their own ranks—and detachment from the civic sphere. I don't believe autonomy implies civic disengagement, even if this assumption often finds its way into conversations on the topic. Doubtless autonomy and civic engagement exist in a delicate tension, and certainly any group of scientists who want to protect their autonomy and remain engaged in public debate will have a difficult balancing act on their hands. (Incidentally, a case study of the Union of Concerned Scientists would make for an interesting study.) But I don't believe either point implies that autonomy and civic engagement are mutually exclusive.

In sociology, I would argue that this distinction has generally been neglected or mishandled in the debate about "public sociology." On the one side, some of the most vocal critics of the idea seem to assume—falsely, I believe—that more public engagement among sociologists would necessarily lead to a loss of autonomy (via "politicization"), and in turn to a loss of authority. On the other side, some of public sociology's main proponents don't seem to appreciate that the idea itself implies the need for a more inward looking focus on the origins and uses of our analytic categories. This is a point I take largely from my adviser, Loïc Wacquant. Put simply, sociologists cannot truly influence public debate, no matter how "public" their work becomes, without first subjecting their own categories to relentless self-scrutiny. Otherwise, they end up unwittingly lending the stamp of scientific authority to ways of thinking that originate among other participants in the "struggle for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world."

EPB: This book began as your dissertation at Berkeley. Do you have any advice for graduate students who are currently working on their dissertations and would like to see them eventually turn into books?

TM: When I was a graduate student, I was always puzzled by the common phrase "converting one's dissertation into a book." (My naïve thought was always, "Why don't you just write it as a book to begin with?") Having just published my first book, I'd offer a double-sided piece of advice. First, to the degree that your advisers will let you, use one or two scholarly books that you admire as formal and substantive models for your thesis. However, second, be prepared to rewrite the book almost from scratch afterwards. Once you get some distance from it, you'll inevitably see the dissertation in a new light. (And if you don't, this might be a warning sign that the resulting book won't be very good.) For me, this process was simultaneously exciting and, quite frankly, horrifying. On the one side, the period immediately after grad school was one of tremendous intellectual growth. On the other side, every new idea required me to delete, revise, or rearrange most of what I'd written before. Each change implied a cascading series of other changes, such that "converting my disserta-

tion into a book" felt like playing an Alice in Wonderland-style game in which each step forward also moved me two steps backwards. Eventually you have to just let go of it.

EPB: Now that the book is out, what do we have to look forward to next from you? Will you be building on any of the themes you address in *Think Tanks*?

TM: Yes, albeit in tangential ways. I'm starting two projects now, the first of which aims to address two of the book's obvious limitations: first, its narrow focus on the United States, and second, its high level of general-ity, or the fact that rarely do I get to engage with the nitty-gritty of specific policy battles. (The latter choice, I would argue, was driven by necessity. Given the dearth of sociological writing on the topic, some of the most basic questions about think tanks had yet to be answered.) The new study will not be about think tanks; instead, it will focus on the structure, reach, and functioning of transnational intellectual networks concerned with policy towards Iran. Aside from its inherent importance, the topic interests me because I think the soci-ology of foreign policy making remains underdeveloped even within political sociology. I'm also starting a new project about the cultural meaning of "genius"—although at the moment I can say even less about that one. Even so, it will remain connected to the main themes of my research so far: namely, the social organization of knowledge and expertise.