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MURKY POWER: “THINK TANKS” AS BOUNDARY ORGANIZATIONS

Thomas Medvetz

Organizations generate a great deal of power and leverage in the social world, power and leverage far beyond their ostensible goals.

– Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations*

ABSTRACT

This chapter uses the case of American think tanks to develop the idea of a “boundary organization,” or a formal organization that acquires its distinctiveness and efficacy from its intermediate location in the social structure. Traversing, overlapping, and incorporating the logics of multiple institutional spheres – including those of academia, politics, business, and the market – think tanks at first seem to be organizations “divided against themselves.” However, by gathering complex mixtures of otherwise discordant resources, they create novel products, carry out novel practices, and claim for themselves a crucial mediating role in the social structure. This chapter’s ultimate aim is to consider the implications of this idea for theories of organizational power. With respect to this aim, I argue that boundary organizations – and organizational boundary-making processes in general – underscore the need to think about power in relational and processional terms.

Keywords: Boundary organization; think tanks; power

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How do power and influence accrue within organizations? The prevailing scholarly answer to this question has been that an organization becomes powerful by specializing in a particular function and then monopolizing the resources associated with that function. This is what Marx meant when he said that the bourgeoisie exercised power over workers, intellectuals, and the state by controlling and developing the means of production. And while Weber took issue with the materialism in Marx's approach, he nonetheless described the power of a bureaucracy in broadly similar terms by emphasizing functional specialization. The power of a bureaucracy, for example, lay in its ability to rationally administer people and things.¹ Weber also argued that modernity itself was marked by the growth of "value spheres," or increasingly distinct domains of action devoted to specialized functions. Science, art, politics, religion, and philosophy: each of these activities had developed its own institutions, its own specialists, and its own forms of value.

In contemporary theory, this idea has received its fullest expression in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who developed it through the notion of *field*.² In Bourdieu's rendering, the power of a field lies in its ability to institutionalize a particular socially valued resource. As Wacquant puts it, a field is a space of relations "in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it – cultural authority in the artistic field, scientific authority in the scientific field, sacerdotal authority in the religious field, and so forth."³

This chapter will consider the implications of this framework for theories of organizational power by focusing on a specific kind of organization: "think tanks," the growing breed of policy-oriented research organizations that have proliferated since the 1960s. Think tanks offer a useful empirical case for applying and extending the theory of organizational power sketched above. After briefly describing the history of think tanks in the United States, I will consider three different ways of conceptualizing their power using the field concept. The first approach grasps think tanks as members of a single field, particularly the political or bureaucratic field; the second treats think tanks as spanning or overlapping multiple fields; finally, the third approach treats think tanks as members of a field unto themselves. But none of these approaches, I will argue, is sufficient for capturing what is influential about think tanks in the United States. To overcome this problem, and to better capture the "murky power" at stake among think tanks, I will develop a synthetic approach that characterizes them as *boundary organizations* specialized in mediating the relationships among more established fields. This approach builds on two sources of theoretical insight. The first, drawn from organizational theory, is the literature on "boundary spanners," or actors who derive their influence from their strategic locations within and among

organizations. The second source of insight is Gil Eyal's concept of the "spaces between fields," which problematizes Bourdieu's approach and introduces into it a Latourian dimension.⁴

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THINK TANKS IN THE UNITED STATES

Taken together, the existing historical narratives about the birth of think tanks in the United States are marked by their inconsistency. The problem, however, is not rooted in a factual disagreement per se, but springs instead from the semantic ambiguity of the term *think tank* itself. Put simply, the absence of any clear answer to the question, "What is a think tank?" gives rise to confusion about how to pinpoint the relevant agents, groups, and processes in their emergence. Smith's seminal account, for example, traces the origins of think tanks to an 1865 assemblage of Massachusetts reformers who later formed the American Social Science Association.⁵ Other writers, however, tell the story differently. Linden, for example, connects the emergence of think tanks to the founding of the National Conference on Social Welfare, a public charity group formed in 1873 (an organization Smith never mentions in his extensive study).⁶ Meanwhile, McGann critiques Linden for this choice, calling it arbitrary and stating that, "I prefer to trace the origins of these institutions to the Brookings Institution, which was established in 1916." But it is not clear how the latter choice is any less arbitrary than Linden's, save for the fact that Brookings later came to be known by the term *think tank*. (And if this is our criterion, then the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910, would be a better candidate for the title "first think tank.") Meanwhile, Donald Abelson dates the "first wave" of think tanks to the period 1900–1945, with the Russell Sage Foundation (formed in 1907) mentioned as the first organization in this wave.⁷

The root of the problem is that in the absence of a definitive way of marking the genesis of think tanks, there is no explicit counterfactual possibility against which to identify their birth, no criterion for specifying when all possible historical alternatives had been foreclosed. It then becomes impossible to separate the necessary from the accidental features of this process or to adjudicate among competing explanations. The methodological approach I have developed elsewhere⁸ is based on the premise that a rigorous sociological study of think tanks would need to shift its focus away from the organizations per se and toward the *social relations* in which they

are embedded. In particular, it would have to focus on the formation of network ties that permitted certain organizations to distinguish themselves from more established institutions – especially those of the market, academia, and politics – even if their ability to do so remains an ongoing and precarious achievement. On this view, it was not just the appearance of certain organizations that inaugurated the birth of think tanks, but also the process by which these organizations became oriented to one another in their judgments and practices. I refer to the organizational network that resulted from this process as the *space of think tanks*.

Put differently, the distinctive feature of this approach is that it treats the formation of the think tank category, not as a simple fact, but as an outcome to be explained. Its advantage is to reorient the discussion to a specific counterfactual possibility: namely, that the organizations now known as think tanks might have forever remained a scattered array of “unique,” unaffiliated groups. Indeed, it is worth remembering that there was no *think tank* category per se, either in public or specialized political discourses, until roughly the 1960s. Newspapers, for example, typically referred to the organizations listed above individually, and with no apparent sense of their membership in a common category. Moreover the emphasis in such cases was often on each organization’s “uniqueness.” Thus a December 1927 *Los Angeles Times* article announced the birth of a new research center in Washington, DC in the following terms: “The Brookings Institution, *a unique type of research and training center* in the humanistic sciences, has just been established in the national capital.”⁹

Shifting the explanandum in this way allows us to trace several waves of organizational development that led to the formation of the space of think tanks. In the United States, the first organizations to focus on the goal of improving public policy through social research were a set of late nineteenth century civic federations, which brought together progressive businessmen, labor leaders, journalists to address the major problems of industrialism. A notable early example was the Chicago Civic Federation, a social reform group founded by journalist Ralph Easley and Chicago banker Lyman Gage during the 1893 depression to address the problems of poverty, labor strife, immigrant assimilation, and urban blight. CCF convened leading figures in philanthropy and education, social reformers such as Jane Addams, and social scientists like Albion Woodbury Small, the founder of the sociology department at the University of Chicago. Another set of organizations whose emergence prefigured the space of think tanks were the municipal research bureaus established in the 1900s and 1910s for the purpose of applying new administrative and accounting techniques to the problems of

local government. The largest and best known of these was the New York Bureau of Municipal Research (later renamed the National Institute of Public Administration), an organization made possible by funding from John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie.¹⁰ Although political corruption was its main target, the bureau's aim was not to root out specific instances of misconduct per se, but only "to study the conditions and methods that continually generate such misconduct, with a view of securing new and scientific machinery to prevent it."¹¹

The municipal research bureaus were followed by a set of foreign policy groups that included the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Council on Foreign Relations. As its bylaws stated, CEIP was established "to advance the cause of peace among the nations, to hasten the abolition of international war, and to encourage and promote a peaceful settlement of international differences" through the "scientific study of the cause of war and of practical methods to avoid it."¹² CFR was formed through the merger of two pre-existing foreign policy groups – the first a network of informal advisers to President Woodrow Wilson known as "The Inquiry" and the second a private club of New York lawyers and businessmen formed in 1918 under the direction of Elihu Root. Both organizations were formed through heterogeneous partnerships of lawyers, bankers, and aspiring diplomats who sought to fill the federal government's growing need for knowledge about foreign states and markets.

In the 1920s, a set of economic research centers emerged to provide technical tools for managing the national economy. The two best examples are the National Bureau of Economic Research (1920) and the Committee for Economic Development (1943). Headed by Wesley Clair Mitchell, a former Berkeley economist and student of Thorstein Veblen, NBER quickly came to perform a series of technocratic functions for the federal government, particularly the Department of Commerce. CED's founding was also linked to the Commerce department, having originated in a postwar industrial planning program initiated by the department's National Economics Unit in 1941. During the same period, a series of military planning groups began to appear as a result of the country's growing role as a world superpower and a corresponding increase in federal research and development spending. These organizations – which included the RAND Corporation, the Center for Naval Analyses, and the Mitre Corporation – were founded by military personnel and defense-oriented businessmen acting in collaboration with scientists and engineers. Their most notable innovation was the development of a new interdisciplinary science of efficiency called "systems analysis."¹³

By the dawn of the 1960s, a large, segmented technocratic apparatus had emerged in the United States to fill the gap left by the absence of an official government technocracy. Only around this time did the term *think tank* first come to refer a specific breed of organizations, and then typically in a manner that was both informal and vague. Attaching first to the post–World War II military planning groups, of which RAND was the prototype, the category’s boundary then expanded gradually to include other organizations. The term came into wider use during the 1970s as the so-called “advocacy explosion” of the period yielded dozens of new organizations designed to influence policy through the application of social research. As a profusion of journalistic accounts announced the arrival of “think tanks” on the political scene, the term gradually became more codified in public discourse.¹⁴ The publication of numerous think tank directories during the 1990s and 2000s, such as the National Institute for Research Advancement’s (NIRA) *World Directory of Think Tanks*, gave the category further stability and international reach.¹⁵ Despite the tendency toward codification, however, the absence of any firm legal basis for the *think tank* category ensured that the concept remained fuzzy, both in general public and specialized political discourses.¹⁶

By one leading count, the number of American think tanks has more than quadrupled since 1970.¹⁷ Think tanks have also become highly visible players on the policy scene, issuing studies aimed at politicians and the wider public, hosting symposia, press conferences, and political speeches, and offering a “government in exile” for sidelined officials awaiting a return to public office. Their affiliated policy experts also commonly supply informal briefings for politicians, Congressional testimony, and news media punditry. It is in this context that think tanks have influenced some of the major political issues of the day. An early blueprint for the Iraq War, for example, was sketched in the late 1990s by a group of neoconservative foreign policy specialists operating in a think tank called the Project for the New American Century. The zero-tolerance policing method known as the “broken windows” approach originated in the Manhattan Institute in the early 1980s. The anti-evolution intelligent design movement was born in the Seattle-based Discovery Institute during the 1990s. Think tanks have also been visible players in debates surrounding environmental, tax, and regulatory policies.¹⁸

WHAT KIND OF POWER DOES A THINK TANK HAVE?

The task I set for myself in this chapter was to conceptualize the power or influence of a think tank. What does it mean, for example, for a given

organization to "succeed" or "fail" as a think tank? Furthermore, what is at stake in the competition among these organizations? In the next section, I will outline three possible ways of answering these questions, each one based on a field theory framework. The view I will put forward is that none of the three answers is sufficient on its own. However, my purpose in laying out these answers is not to undermine the premises of field theory itself. Instead, it is to lay the groundwork for a synthetic account that I believe strengthens and extends this framework. More to the point, I believe this synthesis offers a way of thinking about organizational power that may be of use beyond the study of think tanks.

Think Tanks as Members of a Larger Field

The first approach is to conceptualize the power of a think tank in terms of its ability to generate effects within a larger or more established field. In fact, this is the approach most scholars of think tanks have taken, if only by default, by focusing on policy outcomes as the relevant target of a think tank's actions. On this view, a think tank is "powerful" to the degree that it exercises direct effects on the policy-making process. Not all scholars focus narrowly on policy outcomes as the site of a think tank's effects, however. Some, especially those working in an institutionalist tradition, broaden the analytic lens somewhat to capture a range of possible effects at other stages of the policy process. However, for my purposes what is significant is that both of these approaches implicitly treat think tanks as members of a particular field: either the *political field* (or the system of struggles among parties, politicians, and other political specialists – including pollsters, campaign advisers, and political aides – over the powers of delegation and representation) or the *bureaucratic field*.¹⁹ The term bureaucratic field refers to the array of public institutions "entrusted with the maintenance of the economic and legal order ... [and] the sustenance of the dispossessed and the provision of public goods."²⁰

Doubtless this approach has a certain intuitive appeal. After all, there is no question that think tanks try to influence the policy process – and it would seem that their success or failure in doing so constitutes the best measure of their power. Even so, I would argue that this approach has certain important flaws. The first sign of a problem is that the actual strategies and practices adopted by many think tanks do not actually align very well with the theory. While all think tanks try to establish some form of access to the political and bureaucratic fields – for example, by cultivating network ties to politicians, bureaucrats, and party officials – this fact alone

does not tell the whole story. Indeed, to anyone familiar with the world of think tanks, it is apparent that many organizations also strategically *turn down* certain forms of political access. Consider the Heritage Foundation, a think tank often described as having extensive ties to the Republican party. (Callahan, for example, refers to the organization as “the de facto research arm of the GOP.”²¹) Its Republican ties notwithstanding, it is also worth noting that Heritage has long been careful to maintain a certain distance from the party. The reason is simple: to remain a standard bearer of American conservatism, Heritage must reserve the right to critique Republicans who stray too far from conservative principles. Of course, one could argue that Heritage’s adherence to conservative principles simply indicates another form of connection to the political field, but this would be to miss a larger and more significant point. Put simply, organizations like Heritage must take care to *balance* their ties to certain agents, organizations, and groups within the field in order to avoid the appearance of being their appendages.

This idea – that think tanks are engaged in a kind of balancing act – brings to mind other examples, some of them quite different from Heritage. Consider one of Heritage’s main opponents, the Economic Policy Institute, a think tank established in 1986 by a set of liberal economists, including soon-to-be Secretary of Labor Robert Reich. Over its 25-year history, EPI has established a clear reputation as an organization that speaks on behalf of workers and the labor movement. And while EPI has often disputed the label “labor-backed think tank,” in years past it has accepted up to 40% of its funding from unions. But it is clear that EPI has a complex relationship with the labor movement and the label “labor-backed.” At one level, the association is an albatross around EPI’s neck. Its conservative opponents in particular are often keen to point out that labor unions supply a significant share of EPI’s funding, the implication being that EPI is simply a mouthpiece of the labor movement, not a bona fide supplier of expertise. (Thus, a 2009 Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder Report* titled “Big Labor Admits Employer Violations Rare in Elections” peremptorily dismisses EPI as “a union-funded think tank,” while a 2011 article by the *Weekly Standard* is simply titled, “Just a Reminder: The Economic Policy Institute is Dominated by Labor Interests.”²²) Given the drawbacks of its association with organized labor, it should come as no surprise that EPI spends considerable time and energy fighting off the appellation “labor-backed.” A section of its website, for instance, advises journalists on the organization’s preferred description: “Is it accurate or appropriate to call EPI labor-supported or labor-backed? No. Foundations provide about twice as much

of EPI's funding as unions do, so 'foundation-supported' would be accurate but 'labor-backed' is not."²³

Yet to stop the analysis there would be to miss the key fact that, in other contexts, EPI's ties to the labor movement serve a positive role for the organization. Many of EPI's practices, in fact, are manifestly designed to bolster its ties to organized labor. For example, EPI cofounded the Global Policy Network, a set of "policy and research institutions connected to the world's trade union movements," which lists among its goals "forging links between institutes connected to unions and labour movements in developed and developing countries" and "furthering international solidarity and engaging the common challenges posed by globalization."²⁴ EPI's *Briefing Papers* series suggests yet another facet of this complex relationship. In certain instances, EPI makes a direct claim to speak on behalf of labor unions to an audience of policymakers. (The list of EPI *Briefing Papers* includes such titles as, "How Unions Help All Workers" and "Still Open for Business: Unionization Has No Causal Effect on Firm Closures."²⁵) From this vantage point, EPI's connection to organized labor is not an albatross around its neck at all, but the organization's calling card – i.e., a signal to journalists that EPI will always be ready with a quotable expression of the pro-labor side of a debate, a cue to labor unions that EPI is an ally and thus a worthy recipient of donations, and a pointer to pro-labor politicians that they can always count on EPI for a useful statistic, a private briefing, or an expert witness for a legislative hearing. In short, in a crowded "marketplace of ideas," EPI has what every think tank needs: a recognizable identity and a corresponding audience or clientele.

The point of this discussion is that there is a certain danger for a think tank in achieving "too much" political access, or in any case, access of the wrong form. Doubtless the greatest danger is that of becoming transparently tied to a single party, interest group, or political candidate (even if the strategy may have short term advantages). Indeed, the history of think tanks is replete with cases of organizations that enjoyed a brief moment in the sun by virtue of some privileged form of access to a specific political network or agency, only to be pushed to the margins of the think tank world when that access either evaporated or lost its value. The Progressive Policy Institute, for example, a think tank once considered influential as the intellectual base of the New Democrat movement, offers a clear case in point. By the end of the Clinton presidency, PPI's status among think tanks had fallen considerably along with that of the Democratic Leadership Council that sustained it. (Not surprisingly, PPI recently disaffiliated itself from the DLC in an effort to refashion its public image.) The overarching point is that

think tanks must generally carry out a dynamic balancing act that involves establishing various ties and relations of exchange with organizations in multiple fields.

Think Tanks as Boundary Spanners

If there are important limits to thinking about a think tank's power in terms of its efficacy within a larger field, then what are the alternatives? A second possibility, already signaled in the discussion above, is that think tanks crosscut or overlap multiple fields at once. The starting point for this approach is to discard the assumption that think tanks are first and foremost political organizations, or indeed organization of any particular "type." Instead, the basic claim is that they are organizations that gather and assemble resources generated within multiple fields and assemble these into novel packages. But which resources do they gather, and from which fields? Based on the organizations most commonly cited as prototypical think tanks, the answer is that they assemble heterogeneous samplings of academic, political, economic, and media capital. By the term *academic capital*, I mean visible markers of scholarly proficiency, especially academic degrees and titles. By *political capital*, I mean competence in specifically political forms of expression, including the ability to generate knowledge and make pronouncements effective in the competition for control over the state (e.g., polling data, demographic statistics, "talking points" memoranda, speeches, slogans, and strategic advice). By *economic capital*, I mean not just money (which think tanks typically accrue in the form of donations), but also the means of acquiring it, including the skills needed to raise funding and to "market" one's intellectual wares effectively. And by *media capital*, I mean direct or indirect access to the means of publicity, including the ability to assist journalists and media institutions in their work.²⁶ Most think tanks gather all of these resources at once, albeit in different quantities, forms, and ratios.

Like the previous one, this approach has certain notable selling points. In the first place, it moves us beyond any essentializing impulses contained in the idea that think tanks necessarily "belong" to one field or another. It does not force us, in other words, to prejudge, their character. In this way, it allows the scholar to approach the main question of this chapter in a more open ended way, that is, as an empirical question. The second advantage of this approach is that it introduces a certain dynamism into the theory of think tanks which the previous model lacked. If think tanks are engaged in

a perennial attempt to balance and juggle various resources, then they can never "stand still" or get too close to any of the more established institutions on which they depend for their resources and credibility.

Nevertheless, in its extreme open-endedness, this approach leaves unanswered a key question. What exactly does a think tank – or any organization, for that matter – gain from overlapping multiple fields? To clarify the puzzle, consider again the Heritage Foundation, by all accounts one of the most successful think tanks of the last four decades. From a theoretical standpoint, the puzzle is that by any conventional measure of "power" – political, economic, cultural, and so forth – we would inevitably have to find Heritage deeply lacking. Its focus divided among several fields, the organization is not a major player in any of them. Despite its considerable funding, for example, Heritage is not by any usual standard an economic powerhouse, its financial assets being overshadowed by those of many other organizations, including large lobbying firms and advocacy groups (to say nothing of business corporations). For example, if Heritage were a private corporation, it would not rank among the 1,000 largest firms in the United States. Nor of course does Heritage have any formal political authority. Like all think tanks, it must compete for the attentions of politicians and bureaucrats. It would also be incorrect to say that Heritage has ever possessed much cultural authority, or a legitimate claim to scholarly expertise, especially outside of conservative circles. As Paul Weyrich, one of Heritage's cofounders, noted in an interview, "At the time that we started Heritage ... we had no real experts. We had a bunch of eager young people who in time became expert. But at the time that I had them, nobody knew who they were."²⁷ To this day, in fact, Heritage employs relatively few Ph.D. holders, and its policy staff members rarely publish their work in academic journals. Finally, despite the organization's formidable media savvy, Heritage does not control the means of publicity. Instead, it is largely dependent on journalists and media specialists to get its message out. Why would Heritage wish to be a minor player in multiple fields?

Most puzzling of all is the fact that each element of Heritage's strategy seems to undermine all the others. As I noted above, for example, to the degree that Heritage cultivates specifically political forms of capital, such as "insider" ties to Republican politicians, it also risks portraying itself as an adjunct of the party, thus canceling out any attempt it might make to generate intellectual capital. If Heritage were to take the opposite stance and become more "intellectual" – for example, by cultivating extensive ties to major centers of intellectual production, such as research universities, or

publishing its studies in scholarly journals – it would risk isolating itself from its conservative clients. On this point, compare Heritage’s experience with that of the Hoover Institution, the highly academic conservative think tank whose ongoing affiliation with Stanford University functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the relationship between Hoover and Stanford confers on the former the prestige of being what Hoover calls “part of one of the world’s great centers of higher learning.”²⁸ But the same affiliation also places Hoover far outside of the daily life of Washington, DC and prevents it from courting the most ideologically tinged sources of funding. The connection also routinely creates trouble for Hoover’s directors, who must deal periodically with public calls by Stanford faculty and students for the university to de-recognize the organization.

The question raised by this discussion is whether think tanks are somehow divided against themselves. However, before I consider this question further, let us entertain a third possible way of using the field concept. Again, this approach has already been signaled throughout this discussion, particularly whenever I have referred to think tanks as embedded in a network of relations, as members of a distinct “type” of organization, or to the “world” of think tanks. The possibility raised by these formulations is that we can treat think tanks as a kind of field unto themselves.

Think Tanks as a Field of Their Own

If it is not entirely satisfying to conceptualize think tanks as members of a single field or as organizations that span multiple fields, then perhaps it would be better to apply the field concept in a different way – by considering think tanks as making up a field-like space of their own. To examine think tanks in this way would be to foreground the relations among them and to take seriously the distinctive social forms they have developed – by which I mean their unique strategies, intellectual products and practices, modes of judgment, and internal hierarchies. Central to this approach would be a basic historical proposition: as the organizations known as think tanks increasingly came to orient their judgments and practices to one another, they gradually formed a network and thereby acquired a kind of weak autonomy. Like the other approaches, I believe this one has something important to recommend it. Its main insight is that there is a dimension of a think tank’s existence that cannot be reduced to its relationships to more established fields. To fully understand the products and practices of a Brookings Institution or a Heritage Foundation, we might say, it is not

enough merely to consider how each organization expresses the interests of its audience or its sponsors. Instead, part of what is created by Brookings and Heritage is determined by the relationship between Brookings and Heritage.²⁹

Yet once again, I believe this approach also has some important limitations. The first problem lies in the risk of trivializing the importance of think tanks. Because think tanks are constitutively dependent on more established fields for their resources and credibility, the implication of this approach, to quote Eyal, is that the space of think tanks is somehow a "lesser field."³⁰ Even more problematic, however, is the fact that this approach essentially brings us back to square one with respect to the initial question. In other words, it may well be that think tanks have acquired certain field-like properties of their own – that they have carved out their own jurisdiction and invented certain unique products and practices, that they have their own internal hierarchies, and even that their members have established certain forms of control over entry into their ranks. However, it is not at all obvious what *kind* of field this is. What, in other words, is at stake in the "social game" played by think tanks? To invoke Bourdieu's language, what is the form of capital generated in this space?

THINK TANKS AS BOUNDARY ORGANIZATIONS

To summarize the discussion thus far, I have argued that it is possible to use a field theory approach to conceptualize think tanks in three different ways: first, as inhabitants of a larger field; second, as organizations that span multiple fields; and third, as organizations that collectively make up their own field or "proto-field." Yet each of these approaches, while potentially useful in certain ways, also has certain drawbacks. Furthermore, keeping in mind that our original goal was to conceptualize a think tank's power, it is not clear how they relate to one another. In this section, I will attempt to synthesize the three approaches by describing think tanks as *boundary organizations*. As I have indicated, this approach draws on the idea of a "space between fields" as developed by Gil Eyal, and the idea of a "boundary spanner" as developed in organizational theory.³¹

Let me begin with the latter concept. In its original applications, the term *boundary spanner* referred to individuals located at strategic points of juncture, either within an organization or at the meeting point between organizations. To adapt the concept for the present use would require two steps. The first is simply to extend the concept upwards from the actor to

the organization. Just as certain individuals, we can say, derive their power and influence from their opportune locations within or among organizations, so there are organizations that acquire influence from their locations within larger systems of organizations.³² Before I explain the second step, let me point out an immediate advantage of this approach. Put simply, it allows us to put aside what was once the most paralyzing theoretical split within the study of think tanks: namely, the opposition between elite and pluralist theories. By and large, the early academic studies of think tanks fell into one of two camps. On the one side were the studies carried out in the theoretical tradition inaugurated by C. Wright Mills, which depicted think tanks as the intellectual machinery of a closed network of corporate, financial, and political elites.³³ On the other side were studies based on the pluralist model, which grasped public policymaking as the result of a dynamic interplay among organized interest groups, each with their own resources, strategies, and aims.³⁴ According to the latter view, think tanks should be analyzed, not as weapons of ruling class power, but as one kind of organization among many in an array of societal groups competing to shape public policy.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is possible to reinterpret this debate as an argument about where think tanks “truly” reside relative to the state, the market, and civil society. However, as the discussion also suggests, this is a futile question. To clarify the point further, consider the example of the RAND Corporation, which is by many accounts the largest think tank in the world. Where would we locate RAND with respect to the state, the market, and civil society? Channeling the elite theorists, one could point out that RAND was founded as a joint project of the U.S. Air Force and the Douglas Aircraft Company, and that, since its inception, it has conducted strategic defense analyses on behalf the U.S. Defense Department. For these reasons, one could say, RAND looks very much like an arm of the state, its claims to “independence” notwithstanding. On the other hand, channeling the pluralists, one could emphasize that RAND is not, after all, an official agency of the government, nor is it subject to direct governmental controls. Furthermore, one could cite the occasional cases of RAND’s “intellectual rebelliousness” – or those cases in which the organization asserted its autonomy by questioning the basic premises of its research assignments.³⁵ For these reasons, I could say, RAND should be located *outside* of the state and within civil society.

Without denying any of the empirical facts put forward by either side, I would argue that neither argument offers a very satisfying answer. On the one hand, the pluralist approach arbitrarily privileges the official

jurisdictional categories of the state instead of using specifically analytic categories. From a social scientific standpoint, why should it matter whether or not RAND is officially inside or outside of the government? On the other hand, by suggesting that RAND's formal separation from the state is somehow "false," the elite theory approach tends to imply that its success in appearing independent is the product of a kind of Machiavellian strategy. What neither approach can see is that RAND's independence from the state is the result of a never-ending project of boundary work, in the sociological sense of the term. This boundary work is necessary because the effect of independence is an important aspect of RAND's influence. It is this independence, for example, that allows a Pentagon official intent on a particular course of military action to point to a RAND study as corroborating evidence for his position, even if the study itself was commissioned by the Pentagon with a particular conclusion in mind and produced by former Pentagon officials.

But while it is possible to say that RAND spans the boundary and exists in various domains at once, even this formulation does not quite go far enough. To call RAND a "boundary spanner" would be to imply that the boundaries were already there to be spanned. Broadening our lens beyond the United States, in fact, show that the exact reach or jurisdiction of the state, the market, and civil society is not always and everywhere the same. In many countries, for example, studies similar to those carried out by RAND would actually be produced *inside* the official boundary of the state. For example, the closest equivalents to the RAND Corporation in Canada (Defense Research and Development Canada) and France (Defence Procurement Agency) are both official government agencies. From this standpoint, the location of the boundary between the state and civil society in the United States begins to appear less as a straightforward fact than as a partial *effect* of RAND's practices (along with those of other defense-oriented think tanks, such as the Hudson Institute, the Center for Naval Analyses, the Mitre Corporation).

It is possible to make a similar point with respect to the boundary of the market by citing the example of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a free market think tank founded in 1984. While CEI does not make a profit or sell things in any overt fashion, it nonetheless takes a significant portion of its funding from private corporations. ("I probably have as much business funding as any group out there," says Fred Smith, Jr., CEI's founder and president, in an interview.³⁶) And while CEI's directors would not likely embrace the label *corporate think tank*, neither do they make any secret of their ultimate purposes as advocates for corporate interests. Smith describes

his organization's mission in these terms: "We have to illustrate that business needs allies in the war for survival ... We're sort of a 'battered business bureau.' Businessmen who get in real trouble may well then decide they need allies, and they'll reach out and say, 'Is there anyone out there we can help whose work parallels our interests?'"³⁷ Of course, CEI's officers would likely point out that if businessmen can look to their organization as an ally in the "war for survival," then labor unions can also depend on certain think tanks (such as EPI) for intellectual support.

The overarching point of this discussion is that the *boundary spanner* concept tends to reify the boundaries that are being traversed by a think tank. In my view, it is better to say, as Eyal does in his analysis of expertise in Arab affairs, that the boundary is part of what is at stake inside of the organization.³⁸ Put differently, the organization is the boundary. The power of a boundary organization, then, lies precisely in its ability to determine where one activity "officially" ends and another begins – in this case, where political, market, and media production end and the production of "expertise" begins. The point takes on added significance when we consider the question of the conversion rates among different forms of capital. One reason Bourdieu referred to institutionalized resources using the metaphor of "capitals" was to raise the question of the conditions under which one form of power could be converted into another. By mobilizing and re-investing his or her capital in a particular way, a savvy agent can convert one form into another. The general implication of my argument is that, with respect to the relationship among academic, political, economic, and media capitals, the conversion rates are worked out largely in the struggles among think tanks. If a relatively scholarly think tank such as NBER does battle with a more activist-oriented think tank – say, the Cato Institute – then what is at stake in this competition is more than simply a specific policy outcome. The same struggle can also be read as part of a macro-structural competition among holders of scholarly credibility (especially as scholarliness is defined in the field of economics) and holders of ideological credibility.

By way of conclusion, let me consider one possible objection to this argument. Based on everything I have said, the reader might sensibly wonder what kind of organization is *not* in some way a boundary organization? After all, we would only have to look at a think tank's nearest neighbors in the social structure (e.g., universities, government agencies, activist networks, political parties, business corporations, etc.) to see that there is no such thing as a purely academic, political, or economic organization. There are two possible lines of defense against this objection. The first would be to agree in principle,

and to say that the discussion simply underscores the main contribution of field theory itself: namely, the fact that it requires us to think about power in relational terms. There is always the temptation, in other words, to think of power as an entity, or something you can possess. One can possess money, for example, but we all know that its real power lies in the institutionalized social relations that ensure its ready exchangeability for goods or services. If these social relations break down, then the money loses its power. This is a familiar point, but one that deserves repeating the more deeply institutionalized a particular bundle of power relations becomes.

The second, and more ambitious, line of defense would be to insist that there is actually something special about think tanks, which in turn belong to a broader, historically emergent category of organizations whose most salient feature is their capacity to mediate the relationships among fields. The existence of these organizations would depend in turn on the formation of "interstitial fields," itself indicative of a kind of *hyper-rationalization*. On this view, such boundary organizations could be regarded as powerful to the degree that they succeeded in transcending the "spaces between fields" and acquire field-like properties of their own.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx (1867/1990) and Max Weber (1915/1946).
2. Max Weber (1915/1946). On the notion of field, see, for example, Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 1990, 1993, 1996) and Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992)
3. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992, p. 17).
4. Gil Eyal (forthcoming).
5. James Smith (1991).
6. Patricia Linden (1987).
7. Donald Abelson (2002)
8. Thomas Medvetz (Forthcoming, 2012).
9. Robert B. Armstrong (1927).
10. On the origins and early history of these organizations, see George B. Hopkins (1912).
11. *New York Times* (1907) and *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1908) made a similar distinction in stating that the New York bureau's "aim is not merely the stopping of 'graft' but the correcting of methods and, above all else, the providing the taxpayer with adequate information of just how his money is being spent."
12. Quoted in *Washington Post* (1911), "Bill to Aid Carnegie." January 27, p. 4.
13. On the history of the RAND Corporation, see Kraft (1960); RAND Corporation (1963); Bruce L. R. Smith (1966); James Digby (1967); and Paul Dickson (1971).
14. Dickson (1971).

15. NIRA's internet-based directory may be accessed at <http://www.nira.go.jp/ice/nwdtt/>. Retrieved on May 3, 2006. See also Lynn Hellebust (1996) and Matt Innis and Justin Johnson (2002). Also contributing to the term's codification were research reports on think tanks issued by foundations, NGOs, and other civil society organizations. See, for example, United Nations Development Program (2003), which defines think tanks as "organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy."

16. In the United States, for example, most organizations described as think tanks operate as 501(c)(3)s ("charitable, nonprofit, religious, and educational") under the Internal Revenue Code. However, some do not. Furthermore, the vast majority of 501(c)(3)s – of which more than a million now exist in the United States – are rarely or never described as think tanks. Nor does the tax category have direct counterparts in other national settings, where think tanks are also a growing part of public life.

17. Andrew Rich (2004).

18. On the role of think tanks in the promotion of "broken windows" and zero-tolerance policing, see Loic Wacquant (2009). On the Iraq War, see Donald Abelson (2006). On welfare reform, see Medvetz (2012).

19. Pierre Bourdieu (1991).

20. Loic Wacquant (2004). Quote is from page 8.

21. David Callahan (1999).

22. James Sherk (2009). headline is from <http://blog.heritage.org/2009/06/18/big-labor-admits-employer-violations-rare-in-elections/>. Retrieved on June 30, 2011; Michael Warren (2011), <http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/economic-policy-institute-dominated-labor-interests_552391.html>. Retrieved on June 30.

23. See http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/newsroom_describing_epi. Retrieved on November 20, 2008. EPI also points out that its main rivals – Heritage, Brookings, Cato, and AEI – "are generally not labeled according to their funding sources."

24. <http://www.gpn.org/statement-purpose.html>.

25. Lawrence Mishel and Matthew Walters (2003) and John DiNardo (2009).

26. Pierre Bourdieu (1986).

27. Author interview, Paul Weyrich, Free Congress Foundation, June 29, 2004.

28. See <http://www.hoover.org/about>, retrieved on December 4, 2008.

29. Here I am paraphrasing Bourdieu on the French journalistic field: "To understand a product like *L'Express* or *Le Nouvel Observateur*, there is little point in studying the target readership. The essential part of what is presented in *L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* is determined by the relationship between *L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*." Pierre Bourdieu (2005).

30. Eyal (forthcoming).

31. There is a large literature on this topic. Key early sources include Robert T. Keller and Winford E. Holland (1975), Howard Aldrich and Diane Herker (1977), Richard Leifer and George P. Huber (1977), Michael L. Tushman (1977), Richard Leifer and Andre Delbecq (1978), and Michael L. Tushman and Thomas J. Scanlan (1981).

32. Other organizations scholars have spoken about organizations as boundary spanners. See, for example, Fennell and Alexander (1987).

33. See, for example, Thomas R. Dye (1978), Joseph G. Peschek (1987), and G. William Domhoff (1999).

34. On the concept of pluralism, see R. J. Ellis (2001).
35. For examples, see Dickson (1971).
36. Author interview, Fred Smith, Jr., Competitive Enterprise Institute, December 16, 2003.
37. Author interview, Fred Smith, Jr., Competitive Enterprise Institute, December 16, 2003.
38. Gil Eyal (2006).

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