Think Tanks in America

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The central argument of this book is that over the past half century, the ambiguous organizations known as "think tanks" have become the primary institutions linking political and intellectual life in the United States. As previous scholarship on this topic has shown, think tanks are elusive objects—impossible to define precisely (because there are no substantive properties shared by all members of the category as it is currently used in political discourse) and therefore difficult to study rigorously. The book's opening premise, then, is that think tanks must be analyzed, not as organizations of an entirely novel or discrete "type," but as a constitutively blurry network of organizations, themselves divided internally by the opposing logics of academic, political, economic, and media production. It is through this blurriness, the book argues—and the freedoms and flexibilities that this quality affords—that think tanks exert a subtle but profound influence on American politics.

By creating a new space of action at the crossroads of the political, academic, media, and business spheres, think tanks and their affiliated "policy experts" claim for themselves an important mediating role in the social structure. In their attempts to juggle the competing demands of research, PR skill, business connections, and political savvy, policy experts position

themselves as brokers in a multi-sided encounter among politicians, bureaucrats, activists, lobbyists, financial donors, journalists, media elites, and academic scholars. In this way, they have made themselves virtually indispensable for anyone who wishes to use ideas and information to shape policy debates in the contemporary United States. The book's main conclusion, however, is that we cannot fully grasp the impact of think tanks without establishing a primary break with the common-sense view of what think tanks do. Notwithstanding their celebratory self-descriptions as incubators of ideas, think tanks must also be considered as heirs to the long and deep-seated *anti-intellectual* tradition that commentators since Alexis de Tocqueville have identified as part of the national culture. After all, in a policy-

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making environment dominated by think tank-affiliated policy experts, an intellectual who wishes to participate meaningfully in political life must increasingly obey the rules of the "policy research" game. This is not to suggest that there was ever a golden age of efficacious civic engagement by intellectuals in America, even if there was a brief moment in the late 1950s and early 1960s when it seemed as if social scientists might emerge as a significant collective force in political life. It is only to say that the forms and degrees of their marginality have changed—and that in an age of think tanks, social researchers with the most cognitive autonomy have been increasingly relegated to the margins of political debate.

Think tanks as barometers of parties, interest groups, and social movements

The book speaks to the common interests of *VOX POP* readers in two ways. The first involves a series of analogs between the history of think tanks, on the one side, and the histories of parties, interest groups, and social movements, on the other. To begin with, one of the chief enabling factors in the growth of American think tanks was the relative absence or weakness of formal political institutions that might otherwise have rendered them irrelevant. On this count I would point to the lack of a highly professionalized civil service in the U.S. and the related thinness of the state's technocratic arm. The limited policy-planning capacities of American parties and the comparatively minor roles played by intellectuals in these organizations were also key factors in creating a space for think tanks to flourish. It was in this institutional context that technocratic experts operating outside the formal reach of the state could carve out a significant role for themselves as suppliers of policy recommendations.

This situation has its complexities when it came to the issue of cognitive autonomy. Compared with their European counterparts, for example, American experts and intellectuals who play the greatest roles in political affairs typically enjoy considerable insulation from the constraints imposed by state and party institutions. However, the same experts and intellectuals—being more dependent on business support—have been more likely to accept the pro-capitalist stances of their patrons. The legacy of think tanks, in sum, is closely tied to organized movements of business elites. Vital to their emergence during the first decades of the twentieth century, for example, were the efforts of Progressive Era reformers who hoped that the use of technical knowledge might bring solutions to the major problems of industrialism, especially labor conflict. Progressive businessmen also bankrolled new research institutes meant to aid in the creation of more efficient public institutions, especially through the use of new administrative and accounting techniques. During World War II, the same pattern endured as a broad coalition of moderate businessmen formed the Committee for Economic Development to tackle the problem of unemployment. Meanwhile, a network of free market advocates and libertarian economists established the American Enterprise Institute (first known as the American Enterprise Association).

The history of American think tanks is connected to the development of social movements and organized interest groups in other ways. Not surprisingly, think tanks took on a more overtly movement-oriented cast following the political upheavals of the 1960s. A notable product of the New Left, for example, is the Institute for Policy Studies, a think tank that has explicitly aligned itself with the anti-apartheid, civil rights, women's, environmental, and anti-globalization movements. However, in the decades since the 1960s, it is the conservative movement that has made by far the deepest impact in the world of think tanks. As scholars and journalists have noted, organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, AEI, and the Manhattan Institute became key instruments of conservative mobilization. Their influence, however, extends beyond the battle between left and right. Having attracted imitators on the left such as the Center for American Progress, conservative think tanks have reshaped the very form and practice of political activism in the U.S.

Mind the gap: The disabling divisions of professional boundary making

The second point of interest to *VOX POP* readers concerns the very status and mission of the Parties, Organizations, and Politics section itself, which we can take as broadly representative of the hyper-partitioning of the social sciences into narrow professional disciplinary and sub-disciplinary units. Doubtless sections like POP serve a salutary function for their members by helping to establish coherent intellectual agendas, forging a common sense of identity and purpose, and orienting members to specific empirical questions, useful concepts, and innovative methods. However, and notwithstanding these legitimate appeals, there are certain dangers built into the boundary-making practices that accompany this mode of professional organization.

Nowhere are these dangers more apparent than in the uneven history of scholarship on American think tanks. Consider one anecdote recounted in the book: In 1977, political scientist Thomas Dye saw the need to preface his presidential address to the Southern Political Science Association—a speech that took think tanks as its theme—with an apology "to those eminent political scientists who told [him] that the activities of private policymakers was not 'political science.'"[1] In this apology and the well-founded apprehensions on which it was based, I find an important lesson about the ability of professional boundary making practices to forestall the progress of social science. The point is especially plain in the case of think tanks, which for decades received only scant attention from political scientists and even less from scholars in the related fields of sociology and history.

Why was the study of think tanks so slow to catch on in mainstream American scholarship? The reason, I posit, has nothing to do with the topic's lack of importance. Already by the start of the 1960s, think tanks had established for themselves an important role in national policy-making processes. To list just a few examples: during World War II, the Council on Foreign Relations, working in covert partnership with the U.S. State Department, engaged in a series of far-reaching strategic planning activities related to the country's postwar economic and diplomatic roles. After the war, a new set of contract-based research and development organizations, of which the RAND Corporation was the prototype, became preeminent centers of Cold War military planning. Meanwhile, economic research groups such as the National Bureau of Economic Research and the Committee for Economic Development established new technical tools for managing the domestic economy. During the height of the Keynesian era, organizations such as the Brookings Institution played pivotal roles in directing the economic administration.

Doubtless the liminal characteristics of think tanks, by which I mean their awkward positioning in between the established foci of social scientific disciplines, contributed to their relative neglect by scholars. Yet it is precisely the presence of such intellectual "gaps" that I wish to problematize here. Simply put, my point is that the same instinct that would lead political scientists to classify think tanks as outside of the discipline's purview—the better to define precisely its proper focus—also severely limited its intellectual reach. The same point could be made about comparable acts of sub-disciplinary self-definition, and indeed about any excessive preoccupation with fixing the "true" boundary of a given intellectual enterprise. The risk, I submit, is that of blinding oneself to important phenomena located "in between" the well-defined fields in question.

In light of this point, it seems fitting to acknowledge the collective efforts of the scholars and journalists—drawn from various arenas but operating mostly at the margins of their disciplines—who pioneered the study of think tanks and gradually pushed the topic toward the scholarly mainstream. In addition to Dye, political scientists such as Joseph Peschek, historians like Donald Critchlow, Alan Raucher, and Karl Schriftgeisser, and sociologists such as G. William Domhoff, produced detailed early studies of think tanks, often by focusing on individual organizations or small clusters of them. Not surprisingly, the first book-length study to consider American think tanks as a general phenomenon, written by Paul Dickson, came from outside of the academy.[2] (Dickson is a journalist and independent researcher.) Years later, scholars such as James Smith, Donald Abelson, James McGann, Diane Stone, and Frank Fischer laid the foundations for a proper social science of think tanks. Naturally, my hope is that *Think Tanks in America* extends the tradition made possible by these studies in a way that does them justice.

My focus on the history of research and writing about think tanks (and, more broadly, on the dangers of ignoring the social organization of knowledge production) is inspired by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's insistence that *epistemic reflexivity* remain a cornerstone of social scientific inquiry. By this phrase, Bourdieu meant an unstinting dedication to the task of subjecting one's own analytic categories to rigorous self-questioning—the better to reveal the often-hidden professional self-interests that threaten to narrow the scope of our studies and curtail our understanding of the social world. The aim of *Think Tanks in America*, then, is not just to turn the social scientific spotlight toward a set of hybrid organizations that specialize in "policy research," but also to turn the same spotlight onto contemporary social science itself.

[1] Thomas R. Dye. 1978. "Oligarchic Tendencies in National Policy-Making: The Role of the Private Policy-Planning Organizations." *Journal of Politics* 40(2): 309-31.
[2] Paul Dickson. 1971. *Think Tanks*. New York: Atheneum.

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