

Think Tanks as an Emergent Field

By Tom Medvetz

For the scholar who wishes to understand the think tank and its place in American politics, the fundamental problem is that the central concept is fuzzy, mutable, and contentious. As Simon James aptly noted in 1998, “Discussion of think tanks...has a tendency to get bogged down in the vexed question of defining what we mean by ‘think tank’ – an exercise which often degenerates into futile semantics.”¹ In the decade since James wrote those words, the scholarly discussion surrounding think tanks has grown in scope and sophistication. Yet I will argue that the so-called “dilemma of definition” has never truly been resolved.² The purpose of this brief paper is to outline an approach to the study of think tanks that overcomes the most pressing difficulties associated with the concept.

A murky object

One common premise links existing scholarly definitions. This is the tenet that think tanks comprise a distinctive class of organizations that are formally autonomous from states, markets, and universities. The emphasis is plain, for example, in Stone’s encyclopedia definition of think tanks as “relatively autonomous

¹ Simon James. 1998. Review of *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, by Diane Stone. *Public Administration* 76(2): 409-10.

² I take this phrase from Stone and Denham, who devote several pages to it while noting that, “Virtually all of our contributors point to this dilemma.” Diane Stone and Andrew Denham, eds. 2004. *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 2.

organizations engaged in the research and analysis of contemporary issues *independently of government, political parties, and pressure groups.*³ This strategy of stipulating the think tank's formal independence has the obvious appeal of demarcating it from other kinds of organizations. However, such definitions nonetheless carry several disadvantages. First, they privilege the historical case of North American and British think tanks, which are more likely than their Asian, African, and continental European counterparts to assert their independence. Second, even limiting our focus to North American and British think tanks, the premise robs the concept of *historical* content by obscuring the fact that the first organizations to exist under this banner were not independent at all, but in fact the genetic offspring of states, parties, markets, and universities.⁴ Third, the premise of independence arbitrarily wrests the concept from its everyday use by leaving out many important present-day examples.⁵

Finally, such definitions ensnare the scholar in the symbolic struggles that mark the concept's use in the real world. *Think tank* is an "essentially contested" concept; its proper definition is not merely a scholastic concern, but also one of the stakes of competition inside the space of policy research itself. The label is charged with social consequence. For certain organizations, especially those that would otherwise

³ Diane Stone. 2001. "Think Tanks." Pp. 15668-71 in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes. Oxford: Pergamon; emphasis added.

⁴ Two of the main prototypes of the think tank maintained various affiliations that would have ruled them out of the category by current scholarly definitions. The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences was an offshoot of a university (Stanford University), while the RAND Corporation was established as a joint venture of a state agency (the U.S. Air Force) and a business corporation (the Douglas Aircraft Company).

⁵ For example, why would a definition of the "think tank" exclude such prominent cases as the Urban Institute (which is tied to a state agency), the Hoover Institution (affiliated with a university), the Progressive Policy Institute (the research arm of a political party), and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (a self-described advocate of the business community)?

be described negatively as interest groups, activist associations, or lobbying firms, the term brings a cache of intellectual authority. To become a “think tank” is to rise above mere interest-based politics and claim the symbolic dividends that accrue from membership among expert knowledge producers. It is for this reason, too, that managers at the more staid and academic think tanks often bristle when their junior and ‘less respectable’ counterparts are lumped into the category.⁶

As a result of these problems, the most common stance among scholars has been to hedge one’s bets by gesturing toward both sides of the dilemma: begin by formulating a precise notion of the think tank, then step backwards and acknowledge the concept’s “slippery,” mutable, fuzzy nature. This approach amounts to a falling back toward the murky political folk notion that we began with. We would do better to recognize that trying to establish on paper where the think tank ends and where the university research center, the advocacy group, the public relations firm, or the political party begins only ensnares us in an endless debate about which organizations are the “true think tanks” and which are not. The point is further underscored by the major inconsistencies in attempts to count think tanks.⁷

Toward a social topology of think tanks

I begin by establishing a break with both everyday and scholastic definitions and conceptualizing think tanks instead in terms of their distinctive location in the social

⁶ Rich notes “the eager efforts of some interest groups to win the label ‘think tank,’ for whatever added credibility and stature it might bring their efforts.” Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*, 13.

⁷ Hellebust writes that the number of American think tanks increased from 62 in 1945 to more than 1,200 in late 1996. Lynn Hellebust, ed. 1996. *Think Tank Directory: A Guide to Nonprofit Public Policy Research Organizations*. Topeka, KS: Government Research Service. By contrast, Smith refers to the “approximately one hundred policy research groups now in Washington.” James A. Smith. 1991. *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite*. New York: Free Press, 214. Rich put their number at just over 300 in 2004. Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. Finally, McGann’s estimate that there are somewhere between 115 and 1400 think tanks in the United States at least acknowledge the concept’s fluidity. McGann, “Academics to Ideologues,” 738.

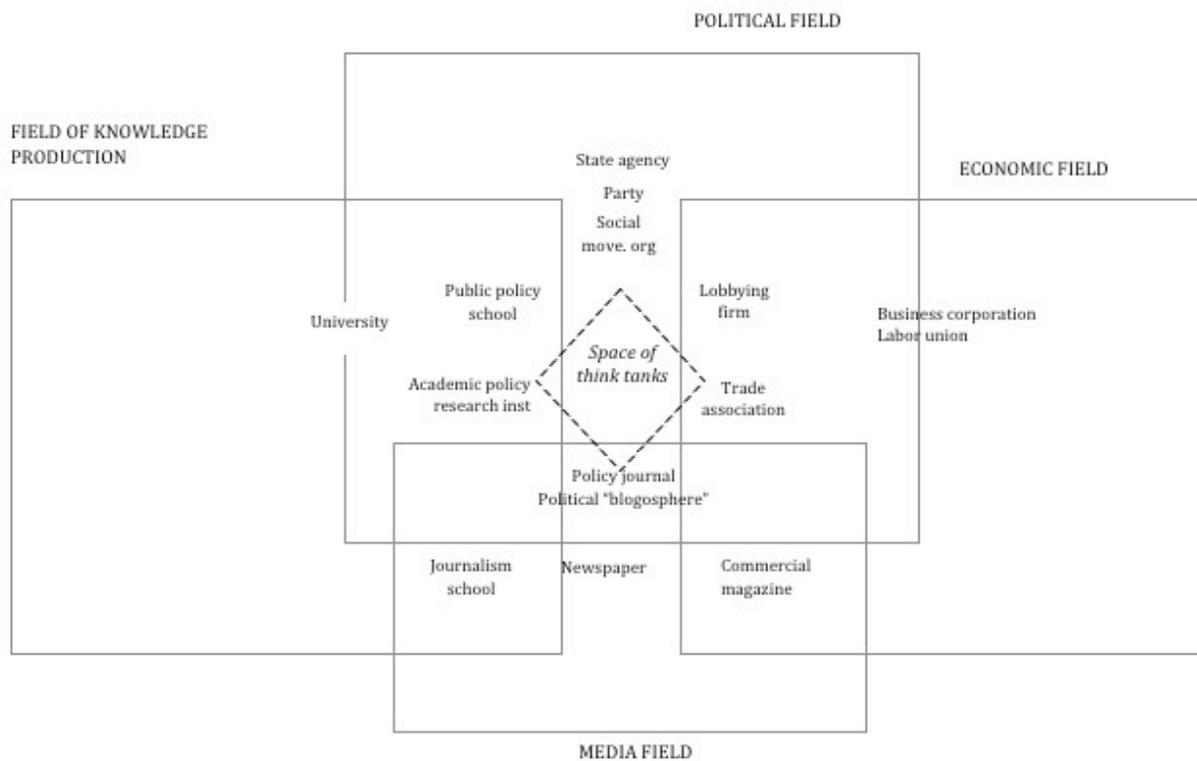
structure. Among the conceptual tools available for this purpose, I find Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "social space" and "field of power" to be especially useful. Social space refers to the idea that the entire social structure can be represented as a multi-dimensional system of positions ordered by the volume and composition of authority (*capital*, in Bourdieu's terminology) organizing relations among individuals, groups, and classes. The field of power denotes specifically the "topmost" portion of social space in which holders of authority (especially economic, political, and cultural capital and their variants) contend over the "exchange rates," or relative values, of the different kinds of capital. The field of power is structured principally by the opposition between economic capital (money) and cultural capital (credentials), the two main sources of access to positions of authority in advanced societies, according to Bourdieu.⁸

This framework allows us to put aside momentarily the question of the think tank's proper definition. Instead, we can proceed by identifying all of the likely candidates and describing their relations – of similarity, difference, alliance, conflict, hierarchy, and so on – to one another empirically. It should be clear to begin with that in their pursuit of political access, intellectual credibility, operating revenue, and public visibility, the organizations that exist under the heading "think tank" are oriented to a multiplicity of social universes. Most rely heavily on financial donations from private foundations, wealthy individuals, and business corporations. Some maintain loose affiliations with research universities, political parties, congressional coalitions, and advocacy groups. Even those that have no such ties commonly enter into short-term partnerships with these organizations. Finally, many think tanks exist in a relation of 'symbolic dependence' on other institutions in that they borrow and incorporate their established forms, strategies, and procedures. Think tanks

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu. [1989] 1996. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

commonly adorn themselves in the trappings of the university by creating endowed staff positions akin to university professorships and publishing quasi-scholarly books and articles. Many also take on the characteristics of a public relations firm by developing sophisticated communication organs and hiring public relations specialists.

Figure 1 heuristically sketches the think tank's position in social space. The main idea here is that we can think of think tanks as *constitutively hybrid* organizations situated in an intermediate structural position. However, it is important to remember that this diagram is only a hypothesis meant to guide our empirical investigation, not a theory per se, and that the positions depicted here are empty slots rather than actual actors and organizations. The task of specifying the think tank's relationship to each of these proximate institutions remains in front of us. Nevertheless, this reformulation offers an important first step toward solving the problem of definition. By shifting our focus to the social conditions that shape the think tank's production, we turn the problem on its head. Rather than try to derive a list of the think tank's 'essential' properties, we now ask the opposite question: given their profound interpenetration with outside institutions, how do the organizations that exist as "think tanks" *come to be seen* as discreet entities? To quote one of the scholarly definitions listed above, how do such organizations earn recognition as "independent" and "non-interest based"?

Figure 1.1: Think tanks in social space

This is a pertinent question because, as I argue elsewhere, think tanks must actively assert their independence through a complex self-presentation.⁹ It is a complex performance made of equal parts distancing and affinity. The first part is the think tank's effort to underscore its difference from universities, advocacy groups, state agencies, and lobbying firms, but the second part involves accruing the very forms of authority that derive from an *association* with these institutions. The think tank is thus caught in an endless and self-contradictory cycle of detachment and association. It can never fully separate itself from its parent institutions because each association supplies a form of authority that makes its putative separation from the other

⁹ Thomas Medvetz. *Think Tanks in America*. Unpublished book manuscript.

institutions appear plausible. But neither can the think tank simply *become* a university, an advocacy group, a business, or a media organ, because to do so would be to cease to exist as a think tank.¹⁰

Returning to our basic problem, then, we can see why an objectivist break from commonsense definitions is necessary and why it makes little sense to insist on the think tank's formal autonomy for purposes of definition. Put simply: we cannot assume what even the think tank itself cannot take for granted, namely its own *sui generis* existence. In fact, orphaning the think tank for operational reasons subtly *harnesses the scholar to its mission*, since the think tank's first goal, even prior to that of exercising political influence, is to differentiate itself from its parent institutions. Arbitrary definitions thus serve the interest of the think tank by hiding the elaborate game of self-assertion that an organization must play in order to sustain the appearance of independence. As I argue, this is also a game of capital accumulation that is won not just by gathering large *amounts* of capital, but also by achieving a good *mixture*.

Some readers will note that this critique of existing definitions of the think tank brings us close to a theory already developed by writers such as G. William Domhoff and Joseph Peschek. This is the perspective inaugurated by C. Wright Mills and known as power structure or elite theory. Briefly, the theory holds that think tanks may be grasped in terms of their ties to more established forms of power, especially corporate and financial power.¹¹ The considerable strengths of the tradition should

¹⁰ A concentrated version of this "game of differentiation" may be found in a 2005 essay called "What is a 'Think Tank?'" by National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) president John C. Goodman. John C. Goodman. 2005. "What is a Think Tank?" National Center for Policy Analysis, <http://www.ncpa.org/pub/special/20051220-sp.html>, retrieved on July 10, 2008.

¹¹ See Thomas R. Dye. 1978. "Oligarchic Tendencies in National Policy-Making: the Role of the Private Policy-Planning Organizations." *Journal of Politics* 40(2): 309-331; Joseph G. Peschek. 1987. *Policy-*

be acknowledged. Like the present approach, elite theory establishes a break with commonsense understandings of the think tank so that we can ask whether policy experts are truly autonomous intellectuals. It also overcomes what we might call “think tank-centrism,” or the failure to situate think tanks within their larger environment.

But the same criticisms that have been leveled against power structure theory will also be raised here: namely, that it is too mechanical, too functionalist, and too seamless. In its tendency to treat think tanks as passive instruments in the hands of wealthy and powerful sponsors, this approach sometimes has the ironic consequence of downplaying, if not overlooking altogether, what think tanks actually do. For example, the elite theorists exhaustively trace specific personnel connections among think tanks: how many trustees of the Council on Foreign Relations also sat on various corporate boards; of those, how many went on to serve in high government offices, and so on. Yet across many writings, they have strikingly little to say about all but the broadest outlines of their activity.¹² Thus, if the error we originally set out to avoid was that of becoming too captive to the worldview and mission of the think tank, then now we run up against the opposite error: that of riding roughshod over its specificity.

We have to reinsert into the analysis the core insight of the dominant approach. Posed in positive terms, this insight is that in spite of their apparent reducibility, think tanks have managed to wrest a degree of autonomy for themselves. They make up a structured social space with its own intelligible logic and history, its own rules of functioning, and its own agents, who in turn possess unique styles, skills, and

Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America's Rightward Turn. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; G. William Domhoff. 1999. *Who Rules America 2000*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

¹² Domhoff (1970, 1978, 1983).

criteria of intellectual production. In other words, there is an aspect of the think tank's existence that can be accounted for only in terms of the relations *among think tanks*. In order to understand the products and practices of a Brookings Institution or a Heritage Foundation, for example, it is not enough merely to consider how each organization expresses the interests of its audience and its sponsors. Indeed, part of what is produced by Brookings and Heritage is determined by the relationship between Brookings and Heritage.

The concept of *field* becomes useful here as a meso-level device for steering a middle course between the micro-organizational approach that grants too much autonomy to the think tank and the macro-structural approach that tends to reduce them to a series of abstract determinations.¹³ My basic proposition is that the space of think tanks has its own specific laws, agents, conventions, and so on, but also that its structure mirrors that of the field of power in which it is embedded. The field's precise degree of autonomy – its capacity to insulate its members from external forces and constraints – becomes an operative question, since the answer will determine the proper ratio of 'internalist' to 'externalist' explanation. But we can see immediately that this is an *empirical* question, not something that can be derived theoretically.

In sum, I have suggested that what passes under the heading "think tank" is best understood not as a distinctive kind of organization per se, but rather as an organizational device for gathering and assembling forms of authority conferred by

¹³ The field concept refers to a relatively autonomous, structured site of contention over a particular form of authority. As the image of a magnetic field suggests, a field is a set of objective forces that are brought to bear on anyone who enters the contest in question – necessities and constraints, rewards and penalties that shape and constrain action. As the image of a battlefield suggests, a field is a context of struggle in which actors vie both over socially valued resources and over the very criteria ("rules") by which those resources are won or lost.

the more established institutions of academics, politics, business, and the media. Yet as think tanks have become more and more enmeshed in relations of ‘antagonistic cooperation,’ especially over the last two decades, they have come to form an institutional niche with its own intelligible structure and history. What emerges is a hybrid *interstitial field*.

It remains to explicate the structure of this field. There is not enough space to undertake this task here, but I will make a few broad observations in closing. First, the space of think tanks occupies a privileged central position in the field of power, although it is for precisely this reason that think tanks find themselves perennially under the assault of other fields. In short, the problem of “autonomy versus heteronomy” is posed not once but multiple times inside of the think tank, or once in relation to each parent institution. Think tanks are not just heteronomous but *multiply heteronomous*. Because academic, political, economic, and media criteria all impose themselves to a certain degree inside of this social universe, the space of think tanks is a world divided against itself. These various principles crosscut and intersect in complex ways, but broadly speaking it is the pursuit of intellectual autonomy that is most directly at odds with the other principles. It is thus possible to speak of a master opposition in the space of think tanks between authority based on intellectual consecration, on the one side, and proximity to political and economic power, on the other. Which is to say that any effort a think tank might make to heed the considerations of academic rigor and exactitude will run up against a set of powerful limitations, the main ones being the need to maximize political access and immediate policy relevance, the need to sustain the budget, and the need to garner continuous publicity. Each of these demands exacts a particular cost on the think tank’s intellectual production, curtailing its ability to do long-term research, to gather background knowledge, to incubate ideas – in a word, to *think*.