

Think Tanks in the United States of America: Definition, Inception and Evolution.

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Abstract:

Public policy research institutes, or ‘think tanks’ as they are commonly known, institutionalized themselves as key non-governmental actors within the American policy-making process. They have grown dramatically instrumental and influential in recent years. Their conspicuous influence stems basically from their considerable capacity to supply decision-makers with policy prescriptions and evidence-based information. This article tries to reframe the theoretical debate over their definitional ambiguity, highlighting that the inability to agree upon a common universal conceptualization is mainly due to the absence of a boundary line between a number of organizations that classify themselves under the think tank category. Through retracing their historical trajectory, this article unveils the structural forces behind the genesis of these organizations in the United States of America. It argues that the highly decentralized nature of the American political system, the Progressive Era’s societal changes and the systemic ‘under-supply of knowledge, among other reasons, catalyzed their inception and subsequent shift from objective research centers to politicized advocacy networks.

Key words: think tanks, policy research institutes, United States, public policy, policy-making, advocacy.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, think tanks have become a global phenomenon. By exerting significant influence on the decision-making process, they have become key players in the making of both national and international policies in modern societies. Originating initially as research centers engaged in conducting research on specific aspects of policy, these organizations provide policymakers with detailed analysis and insights that influence the making of key decisions and shape the formulation of future strategic policies. In the United States, they have grown very influential in framing policy issues as they came to recommend policies, provide the government with expertise and personnel and inform the public. In the last 30 years, think tanks proliferated drastically on the American political landscape to exceed 2,000 organizations different in focus, ideology, funding sources and strategic objectives. However, as their impact -often fostered by ideological orientations and funding sources- has gone beyond mere academic research, serious questions have been raised concerning their transparency and potential conflict of interest. As a result, their ubiquity and ever-increasing influence require a profound scholarly investigation into their democratic accountability, policy impact, and operational strategies they deploy to influence the decision-making process.

The core problematic of this study goes beyond plain historical description to tackle the following inquiries: what is the reason behind the academic failure to reach a universally agreed-upon definition of think tanks? How has the decentralized nature of the American political system paved the way for the rise and subsequent proliferation of these organizations? And, in what ways has their functional paradigm shifted from pure academic research to direct political advocacy and activism? Understanding these structural dynamics actually provides a solid basis for scrutinizing as well as evaluating the role of think tanks in modern democratic governance.

2. Think Tanks: The definitional dilemma

Think tanks are generally defined as specialized organizations, often non-governmental and non-profit, that conduct research on public policies and provide analysis and solutions to a myriad of complex societal issues aiming to influence the formation of these policies (**Hauck, 2017**). However, such simple definition, hides a great deal of disagreement and controversy over how these organizations

should be defined, exhibiting a clear lack of definitional consensus among scholars and politicians alike.

As any other concept investigated in the field of humanities, the term think tank seems to be murky and contested and any attempt to define it tends to be “a difficult and frustrating task” (Abelson, 2002). With over 20 years of experience as an independent researcher and advisor on think tanks and policy research networks, Enrique Mendizabal states that the question of what is a think tank is “the question of the ages” that even some think tankers often find it hard to answer. He asserts that any “search for think tank images” will “come up with a blur album, and quite a few “joke” images playing on the idea of a brain and a military tank or a fish bowl”. Furthermore, if you “ask your friends what they think the definition of a think tank is ... they will more likely ask “think what?” than venture a definition”. He goes on arguing that one of the reasons that makes it difficult to craft a conventional definition is that there are diverse kinds of organizations that label themselves think tanks though they have different funding sources, different structures, adopt distinct strategies and seek diverse goals (Mendizabal, 2014). Nevertheless, a great deal of literature has been produced aiming at crafting a conventional and comprehensive definition of the term. Actually, the definition of the term changed over time as these organizations have grown in size, got diverse core values and ideologies, employed distinct methodologies and adopted different strategies to achieve specific goals (Muller, 2012).

Among the most popular definitions of think tanks there is one advanced by John C. Goodman, president of the Goodman Institute for Public Policy Research, who, as a wide range of scholars, simply defines them as organizations that sponsors research on specific problems, encourages the discovery of solutions to these problems through improving government policies or creating viable alternatives. Economic policy, public policy, social policy, political strategy, culture and technology are examples of a myriad of issues think tanks address (Goodman, 2005). Another definition provided by the United Nations describes them as organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies (Andjelković, 2003). However, Diane Stone, a prominent expert on think tanks, argues that the term is problematic and far more complicated than these simple common definitions. According to her, “Think tank” is an umbrella term that has different meanings to different people. She continues arguing that far from seeking a scholarly conventional definition of the term, its

name alone, is a controversy (**Stone, 1997, p. 9**). If we scrutinize the existing relevant literature, we will find that these organizations are labeled variously by scholars as “policy discussion groups”, “research institutes” (Domhoff, 1983), “policy planning organizations” (Pescheck, 1987) or “public policy research institutes” (McGann, 1992) reflecting a lack of agreement and definitional clarity as to what is a think tank.

As stated before, the failure among scholars to agree upon a common label and a conventional definition of the term is partially due to the tremendous diversity in the community of organizations and institutions that identify themselves under the term think tank (**Abelson, 2002**). Because of the absence of a boundary line between them, think tanks are often intermingled with other organizations such as advocacy groups, lobbies, Interest groups, universities, etc. But the more they try to distance and differentiate themselves from them, the more they imitate their values and practices like, for instance, hiring fellows, conducting projects and policy proposals, advocating strategies and, most importantly, striving to influence and lobby policymakers (**Medvetz, 2008**) to market their ideas and turn their theories into concrete reality.

Despite these conceptual differences, however, there is a large consensus among scholars who investigated the phenomenon of think tanks that these organizations conduct research and analysis about contemporary issues out of the scope of the government with the objective of providing policy-makers with advice on a multiple range of political issues (**Ladi, 2005**). This is mainly done through the use of diverse channels and networks such as newspapers, TV channels, books, articles, social media etc. These ‘idea factories’ have largely contributed in bridging the gap between the worlds of knowledge and power in modern democracies. By doing so, they are deemed pertinent “catalysts for ideas and action in civil societies around the world” (**McGann & Jonson, 2006**) rendering the field of politics more informed and specialized. Besides, as domestic and global challenges grow more complex, the role of think tanks becomes increasingly pivotal in fostering policies that promote sustainable development. In this context, several scholars place a premium on the vital role think tanks play as relevant architects of public policy rather than being trapped in the dilemma of their definition.

3. The Functional Mechanisms of Think Tanks

For a nation to progress and prosper, the formulation of efficient strategies and insightful policies is of paramount importance. In addition to political institutions, governmental departments, advocacy groups, lobbies, political parties ..., think tanks join the list as crucial and powerful actors in the policy-making process. Generally staffed with scholars, researchers and experts, these organizations play a crucial role in fostering political strategy and policy (**The School of Politics, n.d.**). Think tanks actually perform a variety of significant functions. Generally deemed as the ‘market of ideas’, think tanks’ main role is to conduct rigorous research and produce ideas. This is mainly done through the production of in-depth reports, policy briefs, books, academic articles, media interviews, to analyze problems and suggest alternatives and solutions based upon academic and scientific evidence rather than mere speculation (**Pokol, 2024**). A task best explained by J.L. Sandquist noting that think tanks rescue ideas from obscurity, synthesize them then put them in the hands of influential people (**Sandquist, 1987**).

The most visible consumers of think tanks products are government bureaucrats those just below the appointed officials. Lars Nicander calls them the machinists of the government. Because they are obliged to provide their superiors with fast and accurate information, they usually need and seek the services think tanks offer (**Nicander, 2015**). Consequently, think tanks gradually acquired a great level of trust and confidence within the American bureaucracy as they start to play the role of the rescuer and evidence-based information providers.

Additionally, in the complex world of politics, policymakers and government officials frequently encounter a number of obstacles and constraints that may undermine their performance. Time is a crucial factor that makes effective decision-making a real challenge. Because they generally have limited time and/or resources to accumulate sufficient information to generate valid decisions, decision-makers face the problem of ‘under-supply of knowledge’, as Diane Stone calls it (**Stone, 2001**). They are most of the time immersed in the day-to-day bureaucratic activities that devoting enough time for scrutinizing one policy issue seems to be almost impossible. That is why they often fail to gather information and rationally process it when they have little time to do so. As a result, they sometimes rush to take quick decisions or rely on heuristics. But the problem here is that while relying on heuristics may save time, they cannot always generate the

optimal solutions (**OpenStax, n.d.**). That is why the contribution of think tanks in this respect is immensely appreciated by policy-makers who increasingly turn to them to help them decide what solutions, strategies and agendas to adopt in their policy-making process (**Pautz, n.d.**).

Besides, think tank experts are sometimes better able to disseminate specialized policy research within government than government agencies themselves. Despite the growth of the staff in the executive and legislative branches in the US government, think tanks proliferated drastically and became even more active than ever. They add a value and prestige to the thinking of professional bureaucrats and congressional staffers (**Hasan, 2009**) who interact with a number of ‘knowledge actors’, as the German political scientist, Dieter Plehwe, calls them. And being one of those actors, think tanks play a crucial role in a complex network of relationships through the use of multiple channels to reach decision-makers, political groups, corporate funders and the media. They have the potential to create links that would allow them to conduct a ‘discourse coalition’ which would eventually influence the making of a policy or a decision to fulfill a common aim (**Plehwe, 2015**).

4. Inception and historical trajectory of American Think tanks

Despite their presence on the American political landscape for more than half a century, research organizations were not initially called think tanks. Rather, they were often described as ‘brainboxes’ or were referred to using the name of the institution only. In fact, the term ‘think tank’ was commonly used in American colloquial English to refer to the human brainbox or used pejoratively to describe the human brain itself criticizing an individual’s misbehavior insinuating that something went wrong with his ‘think tank’ (**Medvetz, 2012**).

The term “think tank” saw light for the first time with the onset of World War II mirroring an urgent need for novel strategies to meet the increasing challenges and complexity of modern warfare. The term originally referred to a secure place where war experts and analysts used to meet to exchange views and discuss war strategies and plans. Later, think tanks got out of the scope of military policy and started to become even more burgeoning as they moved to cover other public policy areas, prominently economic, social, political and environmental (**Schneider, 2003**). Nevertheless, the first seeds of these research centers date back to before World War II. Historical and academic data show that early manifestations

of think tanks appeared in the 19th century in English-speaking communities (mainly Britain, the United States and Canada) as a response to societal and economic challenges spawned by a number of factors such as industrialization, urbanization and economic breakthrough. The Royal United Services Institute (1830) and the famous British Fabian Society (1884) were the first organizations classified as think tanks to appear (**Oluwole-Olusegun, n.d.**).

In the United States of America, the emergence of think tanks goes back to the late 19th century and early 20th century. Their subsequent evolution has been fostered by a combination of political, economic and social transformations. In the years preceding and following the great wars, think tanks proliferated impressively on the American political landscape. The United States counts today the largest population of think tanks than any other country in the world (**Stone&Ladi,2017**). In fact, this numerical supremacy was caused by many possible factors. James McGann, a leading think tank expert, believes that among other reasons, the unique nature of the American political system, being distinctively decentralized and pluralistic, or what others have described as “American Exceptionalism”, is actually the driving force behind the rise and proliferation of these organizations. The fragmentation of the political power into three distinct branches facilitated the creation of multiple channels through which government elected and appointed officials can be reached. As a consequence, the system became highly permeable which led to the creation of many points of access and consequently few obstacles for outside actors to penetrate into and thus influence the policy-making process. Additionally, when this penetrable system is coupled with a relatively weak party system that shows little party discipline and a federal bureaucracy that is frequently turned-over each time a new administration arrives, think tanks find an opportunity to target a myriad of policy-makers (**McGann, 2007**).

This porous system paved the way for some prominent philanthropists and visionaries to play leading roles in the inception of these organizations. A wide range of scholars and experts agree that the contribution of these figures was crucial and undeniable as it coincided with an encouraging atmosphere engendered by the Progressive Era (1880-1920). The latter, Abelson states, provided an incubator environment for think tanks to emerge and grow. Several prominent figures such as Andrew Carnegie, Robert Brookings and Herbert Hoover realized that the United States was facing formidable challenges in the decades before and after World War I. They were aware, as were many of their contemporaries both in the private and public sectors, that there was an urgent need for economic, social and political

reform. Moreover, they felt partially responsible for taking part in this process through highlighting the vital contribution experts and scholars could make in establishing a more efficient and increasingly accountable government that would be strong enough and well-informed to lead the train of reform **(Abelson, 2019)**. In fact, this mindset is deeply rooted in the western pluralistic political tradition which favors the inclusion of external actors to boost political activities towards the formulation of more effective and desirable policies. This perspective is best explained by the political philosopher Philip Pettit proclaiming that in modern societies there is ‘no democratization without depoliticization’ **(Pettit, 2004, p. 52)**. He simply means that for a democratic government to operate effectively, among other factors, external organizations and actors such as professionals and technocrats, should be involved in the political process to achieve more efficient political outcomes **(Shalbak, 2015)**.

As a result, early manifestations of think tanks in the United States saw light within the scope of such environment and started to emerge “as a part of a large effort to bring the expertise of scholars and managers to bear on the economic and social problems of this period” **(Smith, 1991, p. 120)**. It all started with the inauguration of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Founded by the industry tycoon Andrew Carnegie in 1910, this institution had as a goal addressing international issues and promoting global peace through in-depth academic research conducted by expert scholars and researchers. Fully devoted to foreign affairs, this institution is deemed a precedent type of non-governmental organizations that sought to unveil the real causes of the first World War and try to promote peaceful and diplomatic settlement of global conflicts **(Haas, 2002)**. This was mainly conducted through the advancement of a specific doctrine concerning the way the United States should adopt to deal with world affairs. Since then, the Carnegie Endowment has been at the forefront of efforts to inform the government and educate Americans **(Dubin, 1979)** about what was taking place beyond their borders.

Four years later, the Institute for Government Research was established by the American businessman Robert S. Brookings and merged later with other institutes to form the Brookings Institution in 1927, a pioneer bipartisan think tank that tackled federal government issues. Deemed by many as the most prestigious American think tank, the Brookings institution played a pivotal role in influencing the making of American public policy particularly during the Great Depression

(Critchlow, 1984). In the subsequent years, the Council on Foreign Relations, (1921), and the Hoover Institution were established to be part of what Richard Haas has called the first generation of think tanks which, according to him, was avowedly apolitical. Simply put, the first generation of American think tanks sought to advance the public interest by trying to professionalize the government through generating impartial, policy-relevant information without being directly involved with government officials and policy-makers (Haas, 2002).

However, as World War II unfolded, a new generation of think tanks was born. It coincided with the rise of the United States as a new global superpower (Haas, 2002). The universal metamorphosis generated by the end of the war and the subsequent Cold War challenges increased the need for specialized expertise in technology, geopolitical strategy and defense. These new exigencies led to the rise of a novel type of government-funded think tanks known as “government contractors” that collaborated closely with governmental agencies to provide them with relevant policy information. This new generation of think tanks is best epitomized by the RAND Corporation (acronym for **research and development**). Founded in 1948 as a partnership project between the Douglas Aircraft Company and the U.S. Air Force, RAND was a pioneer think tank that relied upon interdisciplinary research methodologies to generate defense strategic studies and policy recommendations for the US government. Over the years, RAND played a crucial role in influencing the making of efficient solutions to the concerns and problems of the American society domestically and around the world (Ware, 2008).

Operating largely as a government contractor, RAND introduced a new model of think tanks which integrated more closely with government priorities and interacted directly with policymakers. Scholars consider this contractor model a turning point in the evolution of American think tanks where specialized expertise was directly conducted to tackle complex global issues. With diverse funding streams and multiple operational structures, contractor think tanks served as laboratories for generating analysis, policy strategies. Their role was instrumental in shaping America’s postwar global role and giving it the militaristic cast it enjoys to this day (Johnson, 2008). This generation of think tanks assisted the US government to test and craft policy options and strategies such as the Marshal Plan and the policy of Containment which the United States adopted as a core foreign policy strategy for more than three decades.

However, by the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's, the phenomenon of think tanks witnessed a notorious metamorphosis. These organizations increased both in number and influence mirroring an increasing demand for expertise. This progress was coupled with a drastic shift from pure academic research towards activism and advocacy. Think tanks which were initially neutral organizations, Andrew Rich notes, are becoming more and more ideological advocates **(Rich, 2004, p. 206)**. During this phase, think tanks in the United States ceased to be just neutral research centers but became active participants in the policy-making process, particularly in areas like foreign and national security policy. Instead of just producing ideas, this new model opted for promoting as well as marketing them aiming at achieving specific political outcomes. Prior to this phase, traditional think tanks - with little audience and operating most of the time outside the spotlight of media - like the Brookings institution and the Council on Foreign relations, conducted pure academic research aiming at providing objective analysis with keeping a certain distance from open political engagement. However, advocacy think tanks, or 'do-think tanks' as some prefer to call them, started to garner more attention among policy-makers, mainstream media and the American public as they overtly adopted applied research and direct advocacy. This is actually what sociologist Thomas Medvetz describes as 'the Transformational thesis' highlighting the conversion or deviation of these institutions from conducting rigorous academic research to shifting priorities towards active political advocacy **(Medvetz, 2012)**. The establishment of the Heritage Foundation in 1973 marked the rise of this new think tank generation characterized by an explicit leaning towards ideological orientations and by-partisanship coupled with overt political advocacy.

In the decades to come, American political arena witnessed a considerable surge in the number of think tanks to reach around 1,800 organizations, with about 400 located in Washington D.C., the heart of policy-making in the United States. According to the Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, a program managed by think tank expert James McGann and published by the university of Pennsylvania, by 2020 their number interestingly increased to reach about 2,203 think tanks all over the country **(McGann, 2020)**. This ubiquity coincided with an increase in power and influence over the policy making-process. A pivotal moment basically marked by the reliance of these organizations on internet and mass media as crucial

instruments to promote their ideas and persuade policy-makers a certain course of action.

Nevertheless, this new generation of think tanks was largely criticized by a wide range of scholars and experts as these organizations shifted from neutral academic research towards a more politically oriented activism through directly interacting with policy-makers and influencing the course of policy action. Exploring the historical development of think tanks, Richard Higgot and Diane Stone wrote that these organizations may have lost some of their original soul over time as they leaned much more towards advocacy. They used the phrase ‘old type’ to refer to pioneer institutions describing them as innovative, visionary and idealistic while new variants tend to be more political, instrumental and advocative (**Higgot & Stone, 1994**). The first type focused its efforts to bringing academic and scientific expertise to bear on public policy issues. Its chief priority was an objective commitment to the advancement of knowledge for the sake of improving governmental decision-making (**Hasan, 2009**). To that end, early think tanks did not seek to overtly influence policy-making. They rather kept distant from the upper circles of decision-making favoring the world of ideas over the world of politics and action.

5. Conclusion

Established more than a century ago, think tanks became pivotal actors in the American policy-making process. The inception of these organizations was fostered by a number of social, economic, political and intellectual factors that characterized the Progressive Era at the onset of the 20th century. Their subsequent evolution mirrored broader societal changes coupled with an increasingly complex world order marked by modern warfare and multifaceted challenges. As a consequence, their establishment stemmed from a keen interest in intellectual expertise as a new tool to assist the American government to craft effective policies that would meet the exigencies of that era. This trend reflects a profound institutional adaptation to the complexities of modern governance. Finally, it became then evident that despite all the criticism think tanks receive, particularly over the issues of funding, transparency and bias, they continue to be key actors to whom policy-makers frequently turn for advice and ready-made policy options.

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