

## **Think Tanks and Management Consultants: An Emergent Nexus?**

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### **Introduction**

The burgeoning literature on think tanks has largely centered around an examination of their influence on public policy formation, often with a focus on foreign policy (e.g. Abelson 2016). As noted in the Call for Papers for this session, only recently has the nexus between think tanks and business found more interest, namely around the ways corporations seem to have made an increasingly systematic use of think tanks to influence policy debates and decisions around topics that affect them, including for instance climate change (Plehwe 2014; see the CfP for more examples) or on creating a generally more favourable climate for “free markets” as part of what looks like a coordinated effort by neoliberal think tanks and think tank networks (e.g. Djelic 2014). These studies provide evidence for an emerging nexus between think tanks, corporations and governments. But, and this is the main argument of the paper, these phenomena need to be put into a broader context – a context marked since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by an increasing managerialization of organized activity, reaching well beyond business into many other domains, including organized religion, and driven to a significant extent by what Engwall et al. (2016) have referred to as “authorities on management”, i.e. business schools, consultants, media. One example they provide for the reach of these authorities today is the fact that even the Vatican hires MBAs and employs some of large consulting firms (pp. 4-5).

More in particular, this paper will focus on one of these authorities, management consultants, who have a long history of advising businesses as well as other types of organizations including, as mentioned, the Vatican – though generally on the basis of specific projects for a specific client (Kipping 2002a; Engwall et al. 2016). The specific question addressed here is when, how and why, they became involved in think tank-like activities, i.e. the conduct of research and advocacy regarding public policy-related issues. This question has not yet been explored by scholarly research – possibly because of the apparent novelty of the phenomenon or because think tank research has largely been the purview of political scientists rather than management scholars. The remainder of the paper consists of three sections. The first starts with a well-known and widely used listing of global think tanks (McGann 2017) to understand the current extent of the phenomenon, i.e. management consulting firms involved in think tank-like activities and the nature of this involvement, namely in terms of the kind of policy issues they aim to address. The second section then provides a historical overview of the evolving nexus between management consulting and think tanks, examining cases, where the former addressed broader, policy-relevant issues. The third, concluding section offers a tentative typology, based on the different patterns and rationales for the consulting involvement, asking whether and how today's roles and intentions differ from their historical antecedents.

### **A snapshot of consulting-related think tanks today**

Some indication for the current importance of management consulting firms intervening in a think tank-like role can be found in the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* (McGann 2017: Table 28), where those linked to the large consulting firms occupy prominent positions on the list of “Best For Profit Think Tanks”, with the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) ranked first, nine others also making the top 20, and a total of 15 among the top 40 (see those highlighted in the following table). Quite tellingly, the MGI is also listed among the “Top International Development Think Tanks”, ranked 86<sup>th</sup>, and the “Top International Economics Think Tanks”,

ranked 49<sup>th</sup> (McGann 2017: Tables 22 and 23). The first important insight is that management consulting firms dominate the list of the best for profit think tanks, especially among the top 20.

**Table 1: Consultants among the 40 “Best For Profit Think Tanks”, 2016**

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Country of origin</i>
1	McKinsey Global Institute (MGI)	United States
2	Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)	United Kingdom
3	Boston Consulting Group (BCG)	United States
4	A.T. Kearney Global Business Policy Council (GBPC)	United States
5	Nomura Research Institute (NRI)	Japan
6	Deutsche Bank Research	Germany
7	Google Ideas	United States
8	Oxford Analytica	United States
9	Stratfor	United States
10	PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC)	United States
11	Ernst & Young (EY)	United States
12	Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI)	South Korea
13	Accenture Institute for High Performance	United States
14	Eurasia Group	United States
15	Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu	United Kingdom
16	Aegis	United Kingdom
17	Kissinger Associates	United States
18	Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (FCG)	Portugal
19	Altran	France
20	European House – Ambrosetti (TEH-A)	Italy
21	IBM Institute for Business Value	United States
22	GovLab, Deloitte	United States
23	Strategy&	United States
24	Bain and Company, The Bridgespan Group	United States
25	Economics and Country Risk (IHS), FKA Global Insight	United Kingdom
26	Parthenon Group	United States
27	Daimler Benz Future Research Unit	Germany
28	Cohen Group	United States
29	Roubini Global Economics (RGE)	United States
30	Kernel Development Research P.L.C.	Ethiopia
31	Mathematica Policy Research (MPR)	United States

32	Mitsubishi Research Institute, Inc. (MRI)	Japan
33	SRI International	United States
34	Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft (INSM)	Germany
35	Access Capital Research	Ethiopia
36	Roland Berger Strategy Consultants	Germany
37	Hybrid Reality Institute	United States
38	Control Risks Group	United States
39	Engility	United States
40	Frontier Horizons	United Kingdom

Source: McGann 2017: Table 28; identification as “consultant” based on own research

Notes: Rankings unchanged from the previous year. Some corrections applied, e.g. SIR to SRI (Stanford Research Institute)

While providing a good first stab at the population of think tanks, in this case those linked to consulting firms, the ranking tables provided by McGann (2017) have serious shortcomings, namely due to their methodology. They are compiled in a sequential process by “experts”, whose selection and identity remain obscure, as well as the nominated think tanks themselves. They therefore tend to be self-referential, even circular, and can at most provide some indication of a think tank’s reputation among other think tanks – hence the notion of “best” in the table headings.

To go beyond the simple rank order derived from McGann (2017), it is necessary to identify more “hard” data. A very first step is to compare the management consulting firms included among the think tanks in Table 1 above with the largest consulting firms today. That is not as easy as it sounds, since data on management consulting are also hard to come by. Not all consulting firms are publicly quoted and even those that are do not clearly separate management consulting from their other activities and neither is there a consensus what should actually be included in management consulting and what not. Table 2 below shows estimates by two industry experts of the largest management consulting firms by revenue. Comparing Tables 1 and 2 leads to a first, very simple conclusion, namely that most of the largest management consulting firms are engaged in think-tank activities: 6 out of 10 in case of one estimate, 7 in

case of the other. The numbers might even be higher, because it cannot be excluded that McGann’s (2017) expert-driven compilation process missed the think tank-like activities of some of the other large firms. It is difficult to imagine for instance that KPMG significantly differs from the other three of the big four audit firms in terms of conducting some more general research, not directly related to revenue-generating activities – though it might be less visible by not having a dedicated “institute” (see e.g. their “knowledge base of research” called “Insights”; <https://home.kpmg.com/ca/en/home/insights.html>). More research is needed to see what kind of research these unmentioned consulting firms are doing and how they differ or not from those included in McGann’s (2017) list.

**Table 2: Estimates of the largest global management consulting firms by revenue in 2013**

<i>Gartner</i>				<i>Kennedy</i>		
Firm	Revenue (billion US dollars)	Growth (%)		Firm	Revenue (billion US dollars)	Growth (%)
1	Deloitte	14.7	6.0	Deloitte	18.3	7.0
2	PwC	12.7	10.0	PwC	16.1	10.5
3	EY	12.1	12.7	EY	13.7	10.1
4	KPMG	10.7	5.2	KPMG	11.3	6.5
5	Accenture	4.1	4.4	Accenture	7.3	-2.5
6	IBM	4.0	2.1	IBM	4.0	-0.4
7	McKinsey	2.3	5.5	McKinsey	5.9	4.5
8	Booz Allen Hamilton	2.1	-2.9	BCG	3.6	7.0
9	CGI	1.5	3.4	Booz Allen Hamilton	3.4	-5.5
10	CSC	1.4	-3.6	Mercer	3.3	1.6

Sources: See Engwall et al. 2016

A second step going beyond Table 1 involves identifying the various types of consulting firms involved in these think tank activities, based on our knowledge of the current state and the history of the management consulting industry (see Kipping 2002a; Engwall et al. 2016 for some

details and additional references). Using such a more fine-grained analysis shows that there are three rather distinct types of consulting firms listed among the “Best For Profit Think Tanks”:

*1. Those providing IT-based consulting services, coming from two different origins*

- a. Audit and accounting: Deloitte, PwC, EY and Accenture, which goes back to Arthur Andersen (now defunct), with KPMG missing;
- b. Hard- and software or IT-service: IBM and Altran, which is not in Table 2, while others like CGI or CSC or Booz Allen Hamilton (BAH) are not in Table 1;

*2. The strategy or “big image” firms, with*

- a. The so-called “elite three” or “MBB” (McKinsey, BCG, Bain) all present;
- b. A few second-tier firms: A. T. Kearney, Berger and Strategy&, which was spun-off from IT-focused BAH in 2008 as Booz & Co. and acquired by PwC in 2014;
- c. An outlier: The Italian firm Ambrosetti, which has a wide range of activities, including consulting and training;

*3. The Japanese research institutes: Nomura and Mitsubishi, which combine elements of think tanks, collective and single-project consulting (see Kipping 2002b) and have origins going back directly or indirectly back to the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), even if the latter no longer provides business consulting today.*

The next step is to look in some more detail into their basic characteristics and, more importantly, actual activities in terms of their (research) reports, the topics they address and, as far as possible, their “impact”, measured in terms of where and how often they were cited. This ongoing research is complicated by the absence of independent studies (both scholarly and journalistic) on these think tanks, so has to rely almost exclusively on their own websites.

Preliminary results of the analysis based on these data confirm the somewhat exceptional and highly visible position of the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), justifying its top ranking in the “Best For Profit Think Tanks” list – though there might be some question to what extent its visibility is derived from McKinsey’s reputation. In any case, the MGI seems to publish most reports; these reports tend to be significantly longer than those produced by similar institutes – taking length as a proxy for depth; and they tend to be widely referenced in the relevant

business press. Other firms produce fewer and shorter reports or tend to prefer op-eds to publish their insights, like A. T. Kearney's Global Business Policy Council (GBPC) for instance – though as “opinion” pieces these probably convey less objectivity than a research-based report. In some other cases, their inclusion in the list – let alone their ranking – does not seem to be related to their publicly visible and referenced reports, but rather based on the fact that they explicitly refer to themselves as “think tanks”, which is notably the case for the two Japanese research institutes (Nomura and Mitsubishi) as well as Ambrosetti -- with neither of them having produced any widely recognized reports.

There is also some question why Strategy& by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) are mentioned separately since the latter acquired the former in 2014 when it was still Booz & Co. – though with an obligation to change the name. They do still retain a somewhat separate identity, though Strategy& on its website refers to reports by PwC in addition to its own studies (see <https://www.strategyand.pwc.com/>). A similar issue arises with Deloitte, which is listed with its US-based GovLab and as Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, which is the legal entity for this globally operating firm. Again, this separation does seem justified given that Deloitte produces “insights” on a wide range of topics, usually generated by various “centers”, including, interestingly enough, the “Deloitte Center for Government Insights”, and often published through its own “Deloitte University Press” (e.g. [https://dupress.deloitte.com/content/dam/dup-us-en/articles/3044\\_mission-analytics/DUP\\_Mission-Analytics.pdf](https://dupress.deloitte.com/content/dam/dup-us-en/articles/3044_mission-analytics/DUP_Mission-Analytics.pdf)) and sometimes in a sponsored section within *The Wall Street Journal* (e.g. <http://deloitte.wsj.com/cio/>) – both an indication of the “blurring of boundaries” between academia, consulting and publishing (Engwall and Kipping 2006).

In terms of the actual topics covered by these consulting-related think tanks, the preliminary analysis suggests that these are broadly similar (see Table 3 below). This should not come as too much of a surprise given that most of these firms offer a broad range of comparable services to the same type of clients – though sometimes with a different emphasis. Equally, if not more importantly, they also tend to mimic each other, catching up quickly with what others identify

as important trends – a behaviour, labelled quite tellingly as “hitch-hiking on a hype” in a study on the spread of business process reengineering (Benders et al. 1998). An important focus across all firms seems to be the notion of competitiveness, at global, industry and firm levels – possibly an echo of the work done by HBS Professor Michael Porter (esp. 1980; 1990) in popularizing these among decision-makers in business and government. Not surprisingly, technology and its impact also seem a shared concern, and, possibly somewhat more surprisingly, so is the future of the workforce.

**Table 3: Main topics covered by selected consulting firm think tanks**

<i>McKinsey Global Institute</i>	<i>Global Business Policy Council, A. T. Kearney</i>	<i>Accenture Institute for High Performance</i>
Productivity, competitiveness & growth	Economy / Geopolitics / Industry analysis	Geo-economic Competitiveness / Industry Competitiveness, Government and Society / Enterprise Competitiveness and Customer Experience
Labor markets & future of work	Demographics	Leadership, Management and Workforce Excellence
Financial markets		
Technology & innovation	Technology	Impact of Technology on Performance / Innovation and Risk Management
Urbanization & infrastructure		
Natural resources	Resources / Environment	
	Governance / Leadership	Leadership, Management and Workforce Excellence

*Source:* Own research, based on relevant websites

*Note:* MGI used as a template, with others organized accordingly; MGI ordered by number of reports (most to fewest)



In order to go beyond the information available on the consulting-related think tanks and their current websites, the next section examines the relationship between consultants and think tanks in a long-term, historical perspective.

### **A brief history of consulting firms as “think tanks”**

Management consulting has a history going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with origins in both accounting and engineering, acquiring an identity in its own right since the interwar period and, even more so, the Second World War, and experiencing a significant growth spurt – referred to as a “consulting explosion” by some (e.g. Ernst and Kieser 2002) – since the 1990s (for an overview, see Engwall et al. 2016). This development, it is important to note, has been far from linear, notably in terms of the dominant service providers and the ideas or, to stress their ephemeral nature, “fashions” (Abrahamson 1996) they disseminated. Kipping (2002a) has suggested to characterize the evolution of the management consulting industry as a series of overlapping “waves” or “generations” driven by the changing pre-occupations of executives, marked –to put it simply – successively by (i) efficiency increases (on the shop floor and elsewhere), (ii) corporate strategies and structures and (iii) IT-based coordination and communication with stakeholders in- and outside organizations – with each of these waves bringing to the fore new types of service providers while marginalizing most previous ones. This crude periodization seems equally useful when examining the antecedents and, for some, origins of the think tanks founded by management consulting firms over recent decades.

#### ***Spreading the gospel of scientific management***

The proximity between management consulting and think tank activities seems closest during the first of these periods, marked by what is widely referred to as scientific management or Taylorism, based on its most visible figurehead Frederick Winslow Taylor (1858-1915). Taylor and his many acolytes as well as competitors and imitators relied on a wide range of efforts to introduce their various systems intended to promote increased efficiency. Initially, these

efficiency experts, as they tended to be called, went about spreading their ideas with almost missionary zeal – a gospel, which, in most cases and at least in theory, also aimed at sharing the resulting productivity gains and promoting social peace more broadly (Nyland and Bruce 2012). These efforts included publications and presentations but also consulting, usually by individuals – though the number of more commercially oriented firms grew during the interwar period (Engwall et al. 2016). In addition, there were more organized efforts through various associations and organizations, many of which we would today refer to as think tanks.

In his study on the rise of think tanks in the United States Smith (1991) has devoted a number of chapters to these early efforts and actors, including Taylor as “the new gospel’s most famous preacher”. But while mentioning graduate schools of business and business consultants (p. 47), he saw the various think tanks that emerged at the time as focusing almost exclusively on public rather than business administration, with, as their main objective, making municipal governments as well as the federal government more efficient. Such a focus reflects the long-standing attention of the think tank literature towards policy-making, but largely ignores or at least obscures the nexus of activities and actors transcending these domains at the time. While waiting for a more systematic, possibly formal analysis, one example of such an important node within these networks might help illustrate their extent and reach: the Twentieth Century Fund, today The Century Fund (TCF). To be fair, Smith (1991) did discuss the TCF though largely with respect to its role in supporting Roosevelt’s New Deal and, more generally, its work on financial markets and social security policy (see esp. pp. 84-86 and 290-1).

The TCF was founded in 1919 by the Boston department store owner Edward A. Filene (1860–1937) as the Cooperative League – and renamed in 1922 (see TCF 1994; and, for Filene, also Stillman 2004). Filene was an early supporter of scientific management and its social mission. Among those whom he introduced to these ideas was Clarence Bertrand (C.B.) Thompson (1882–1969), who, after graduating in law from the University of California and in economics and sociology from Harvard, originally served as a minister in the Unitarian Church. But following his contact with Filene, he became one of the earliest scholars of Taylor and his

system and, based at the recently created Harvard Business School (HBS), published many books and articles on the topic, including *The Theory and Practice of Scientific Management* (Thompson 1917). Somewhat surprisingly, Thompson turned down a full professorship at HBS and instead moved to France in 1917 to help increase efficiency in armaments production. He stayed in the country after WWI to work as a consultant promoting and implementing what he labelled the “Taylor-Thompson system” but returned to the US after the outbreak of WWII, dedicating the remainder of his life to biochemistry (Wren et al. 2015).

Before setting up the Twentieth Century Fund, Filene himself had also been interested in increasing efficiency in his own and similar organizations, namely by creating the International Retail Research Association in 1916 “to spread innovations in management” among member stores (Jeacle 2004: 1167). The TCF continued to address issues concerning labor, business, and government publishing many reports covering these topics throughout the 1930s and 1940s (see TCF 1994 for a list). And among the three founding trustees of the TCFs in 1919 was another “activist manager”, the Boston-based paper manufacturer Henry S. Dennison (1877-1952), who also lectured at the Harvard Business School, co-authored two books with Kenneth Galbraith and advised the administrations of US Presidents Wilson, Harding, Hoover and Roosevelt (Bruce 2006: 1113). Possibly inspired by Filene’s Retail Research Association, in 1922 Dennison co-founded the locally-based Manufacturers’ Research Association, which in turn prompted British chocolate producer Seebohm Rowntree to set up Management Research Groups in his home country. Rowntree entrusted their direction to Lyndall Urwick (1891-1983), who had worked with him since 1922 and went on to become a highly influential management thinker, spreading the ideas of, among others, Henri Fayol and Mary Parker Follett (Brech et al. 2010).

Urwick closes the loop to the Twentieth Century Fund, since in 1928 he became the Director of the International Management Institute (IMI) in Geneva, which had been established the previous year with funding from the TCF, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the International Labour Organization (ILO), which was also based in Geneva, created in 1919 to promote

interaction between business, trade unions, and governments (Boyns 2007; Cayet 2009). The IMI was short-lived though; it had to close down in 1933, mainly for a lack of funding. Urwick himself returned to the UK, where he co-founded a consulting firm, Urwick, Orr and Partners, but was more active in presentations and publishing rather than the actual consulting activities. Among his publications was an influential volume, entitled *Papers on the Science of Administration*, edited jointly with Luther H. Gulick (1892-1993) (Gulick and Urwick 1937). This brings us back to the public policy-oriented think tanks at the time (see Smith 1991), since Gulick briefly directed the Training School of Public Service within the New York Bureau of Municipal Research and came to head the latter when it was transformed into the National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA) in 1928 and then into the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) in 1931. He remained its director, with interruptions, until 1961 and chairman until 1982. Smith (1991), it should be noted, does mention the Bureau and NIPA (pp. 49-51) though not Gulick. In addition to directing a think tank, Gulick was also a public-sector consultant, advising US administrations at all levels, and notably served as one of three members of the “Committee on Administrative Management” established by Roosevelt in 1936 to advise on the reorganization of the executive branch (Fesler 1987). After WWII Gulick extended his advisory activities to foreign governments, including Egypt, India and Iran (see Gelfand et al. 2015).

This brief account has tried to trace part of the network of individuals and organizations surrounding Filene’s Twentieth Century Fund (TCF). While far from complete, it nevertheless gives an impression of how think tank and consulting activities were closely intertwined when it came to spreading the gospel of scientific management into both public and business administration. This pattern continued with some modifications, namely regarding a stronger business focus, in the subsequent period.

### ***Sharing best practices among businesses (and beyond)***

Throughout the interwar period the dissemination and application of scientific management thrived. But while the above-mentioned think tanks, associations, and individuals played an

important part in spreading its gospel into many domains, commercially driven consulting firms increased their role, focusing almost exclusively on introducing their proprietary systems into businesses. The firm founded by French immigrant Charles E. Bedaux in the US Mid-West in 1916 was particularly successful, working with many large and well-known clients and building a strong global presence since the mid-1920s (Kreis 1992; Kipping 1999). But the interwar period also saw the emergence of a new type of consultants initially referred to as “management engineers”, who focused more on the organization as a whole rather than trying to optimize specific processes like most Taylorists did. These new service providers, which operated as firms rather than individuals, became heavily involved in reorganizing (near-)bankrupt businesses during the Great Depression and, during WWII, reorganized many branches of the military and the government as well as helping businesses convert to war-time production. All these activities increased their visibility significantly, leading to further work from the government and big business after the war.

Most of these firms had a clear commercial orientation – though covered with a performative coat of professionalism (Kipping 2011). A few others that had more of a research focus also thrived, at least in the immediate post-WWII period, when big science, together with big business and big government, were seen as instrumental for the military and economic superiority of the US. Among them was the firm established by Arthur D. Little (ADL) in Boston in 1886 as a contract research organization, initially with a focus on chemistry. During the interwar period ADL also started offering more general advice on R&D and technology policy, in particular since 1927 with the publication of a monthly *Industrial Bulletin* targeted at “bankers, investors and industrial executives” (Kahn 1986). After WWII, the firm became a major proponent of applying operations research to management questions, initially in cooperation with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Harvard Business School (HBS). However, as business schools and management research became more “scientized” since the late 1950s, ADL started following a more commercial logic limiting its generic research-based contributions. It nevertheless remained invested in educational activities through a Management Education Institute focusing originally on administrators from developing

countries, eventually morphing into the ADL School of Management. It was spun-off in 2002 when ADL went bankrupt and turned into the Hult International Business School. Incidentally, after ADL's bankruptcy its non-US based assets and the brand name were acquired by Altran, which itself had been founded in Paris in 1982 to provide advice on technology and innovation. ADL became independent again through a management buy-out in 2011, now focused on management consulting at the intersection of strategy, innovation and technology.

Another example, with a similar though ultimately more influential trajectory is the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), today SRI International. It was established in 1946 as a not-for-profit subsidiary by Stanford University, which also provided initial funding, with among its aims "the promotion and extension of knowledge and learning", "the application of science in the development of commerce, trade and, industry," and "the improvement of the general standard of living and the peace and prosperity of mankind" (Nielson 2004: Chapter 1, p. 1). What matters here was its so called "Business Group", led by Stanford MBA graduate Weldon B. "Hoot" Gibson (1917–2001). This group offered a wide range consulting services, including the introduction of the decentralized multidivisional organization or M-form and long-range planning as well as, apparently, being the first to develop the notion of "stakeholders" in the early 1960s (Nielson 2004: Chapter 14, p. 4). These activities propelled SRI to the top spot in a revenue-based ranking of US consulting firms compiled by Higdon (1969) in the first comprehensive book-length treatment of the industry, entitled *The Business Healers*.

However, the consulting SRI offered was different from the more commercially oriented service providers such as Booz Allen Hamilton or McKinsey – the "big image" firms, as Higdon (1969) called them. This was partly driven by its affiliation with Stanford University, which only ended in 1970, and which subjected SRI to a policy of having "to objectively research a situation [...] and not to interpret the research findings nor consult regarding their implications" (Nielson 2004: Chapter 1, p. 2). And while providing advice to specific organizations, it also offered many collective services – often in a subscription format, ultimately aiming at the development and exchange of best practices. For instance, to assist companies with their long-range planning, it

provided forecasts on such a basis, with the number of subscribers growing from 73 at the outset in 1959 to over 400 less than ten years later and including well-known companies such as IBM, Ford, and Shell. SRI also conducted many projects for specific companies and established a more or less permanent presence in various cities in both Europe (London, Paris, Bonn, Milan, Stockholm, Lisbon, Zurich) and Asia (Tokyo and Taipei) (for details, see Nielson 2004: Chapters 13 and 14) – ahead of many of the above mentioned purely commercial firms. SRI seemed particularly active and successful in Scandinavia and Japan, possibly because knowledge sharing at least within established business groups was commonplace there. Regarding the former, it certainly also helped that Gibson personally knew the leaders of two dominant Swedish family-owned groups, Marcus Wallenberg and Axel Johnson. Among its clients in Japan were Nissan, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone (NTT) and the Sumitomo Bank, with projects often focused on technology.

Even more consequential, in hindsight, was the support SRI provided Nomura Securities in transforming its Research Division into the Nomura Research Institute (NRI) modelling it closely after its own practices and providing the initial training for its staff. After merging with Nomura Computer Systems in 1988 and listing on the Tokyo Stock Exchange in 2001, NRI is today, according to its own website, a think-tank and IT-based consulting firm with over 10,000 employees and some international presence though mostly serving Japanese clients. More importantly, NRI in turn became a model for additional institutes in Japan, notably the Mitsubishi Research Institute (MRI) established in 1970. Even after SRI abandoned its business consulting activities in the early 1980s, focusing solely on economic development and contract research, these “J-type” consultants (Kipping 2002b) continued its tradition of combining collective and shared research with single-client centric projects – with the number of the latter apparently increasing more recently.

### ***Competing on thought leadership since the 1990s***

Consulting changed again during the 1980s, when companies started to reduce hierarchical levels to become leaner and rely on IT-based tools to hold together their own increasingly global

operations and the more widespread and fractured/disjointed supply chains. In this context, companies with prior knowledge of IT combined with an existing (global) client base had an advantage: This meant, on the one hand, the large audit and accounting firms, which had already offered low key management advisory services earlier; and, on the other, the providers of computer hard- or software or IT-services, faced with decreasing margins in their traditional businesses. Both types of firms expanded fast and, despite some bumps on the way, largely dominate the revenue-based rankings of the industry today (see Table 2 above). This forced the incumbents to either change their direction, the case of Booz Allen Hamilton, which had conducted IT-based services for the federal government since the 1950s and eventually spun-off its strategy consulting activities (as Booz & Co., then Strategy&); or to defend and reassert their authority in other ways. Those who did neither, were acquired and/or vanished (see the example of ADL above).

The possible path for those aiming to retain their identity and their positioning at the top of the reputational pecking order, had been traced by an incumbent, McKinsey & Co., and a newcomer, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). Accounting professor James O. McKinsey (1889-1937) founded a consulting firm in 1926 to provide comprehensive business surveys, but died of pneumonia in 1937. After WWII, the firm was reshaped by Marvin Bower (1903-2003) in the image of a law firm and with a focus on top management advice (McDonald 2013). Among the means to achieve that aim, was the organization of leadership events with executives, at times jointly with universities, and publications, including, since 1964, the *McKinsey Quarterly*, modelled after the *Harvard Business Review*, and, in 1982, the first management bestseller, *In Search of Excellence*, written by two of its consultants (Peters and Waterman 1982). The latter was squarely aimed at the “thought leadership” established at the time by BCG, which been founded by Bruce Henderson (1915-92) in 1963 as a division of the Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company and only became fully independent by the late 1970s. To create a space among the “big image” firms, as Higdon (1969) had called them, BCG focused on content, specializing namely in strategy. Geographically, it also tried to avoid too much of a direct confrontation, by



acquiring extant, local service providers and concentrating, to some extent, on Asia long before those markets took off in the 1990s.

All of these research-driven efforts at the time focused on the corporate world, part of an attempt to retain visibility and set agendas for business leaders. These efforts did provide an important stepping stone though for the consultants' involvement in issues of broader societal and economic relevance since the 1980s – an involvement that remains to be examined more systematically but can be illustrated with a few examples (mentioned by Kipping and Wright 2012). Thus, in Australia, McKinsey & Co. became heavily involved in the definition of government policies to reduce tariffs and deregulate labour markets. And in Germany, McKinsey contributed to reflections on the reform of the educational system at many levels, namely under Herbert Henzler, who led the German office between 1985 and 1999. Or, when it comes to debates about the healthcare system in the United States, the ongoing focus on market-based solutions can partially be attributed to recommendations by BCG during the 1980s and 1990s that portrayed them as more suitable for containing costs.

The think tank-like activities of these and other strategy firms have to be seen as (a) a continuation and extension of these efforts to demonstrate “thought leadership” – a term that continues to figure prominently in the description of in their activities on the relevant web pages; and (b) part of an ambition to enlarge their appeal to clients beyond business and beyond the fully developed economies – based on the idea that (Western) management principles were applicable everywhere and to anything (Engwall et al. 2016). In the case of most strategy firms, this thought leadership was made visible and explicit through paper- and, increasingly, web-based publications, but only rarely led to the establishment of “true” think tanks. Even McKinsey, which was the first mover in terms of creating the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) in 1990 calls it a “research arm” – though it does mention the top ranking in the “Best For Profit Think Tank” list on its website given the obvious boost to its reputation. Few actually went as far as McKinsey in terms of establishing separate, distinguishable structures. Thus, BCG only created the Henderson Institute (BHI) in 2015 to honour what would have been

its founder's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. It has three components: the "StrategyLab", which builds on a low-key Strategy Institute established in 1998 and focuses on business specific solutions (MarketLine 2016); "BCG Fellows", comprised of the firm's "most accomplished thought leaders"; and, as the only "new unit", the "Center for Macroeconomics", which addresses broader issues. Neither Berger nor Strategy& have separate names and structures for generating thought leadership. Among the "elite three", Bain's Bridgespan Group is even further from a think tank, since it does not conduct research but offers management consulting advice to NGOs. It was launched in 1999, in part to attract or retain talented consultants disinterested in advising corporations. Some elements of a think tank can be found at Ambrossetti, which explicitly uses the label to describe part of its offerings and refers to its ranking in the Go To list ("No.1" in Italy and "in the European top ten"), and at A. T. Kearney's Global Business Policy Council (GBPC). But both are largely reminiscent of the SRI; they tend to be membership based and have the exchange of information and best practices among their main objectives, with the GBPC going back to a "CEO Retreat" first held in 1992.

Even more importantly, the independence and objectivity of all these efforts is at best questionable, even if the McKinsey Global Institute, for instance, points out that its "research [...] is not commissioned by any business, government, or other institution". However, here like elsewhere, that research is being carried out by internal consultants directed by the firm's partners – though, to provide at least a varnish of objectivity, some reference tends to be made to (academic) advisors and experts, including "Nobel laureates" in the case of the MGI – albeit without explaining their specific involvement. Collaborations with outsiders seem intended to enhance the reputation of both partners, for instance in case of BCG collaborating with the *MIT Sloan Management Review* on an "8-year study of how corporations address sustainability" from 2009 to 2017 – with the yearly reports written by the consultants though. The web-based descriptions for these various activities do little to hide their ultimately commercial objectives (emphasis added): The MGI aims to "**help** leaders [...] **develop a deeper understanding** of the evolution of the global economy"; BCG's Center for macroeconomics "**articulates** the firm's views" on major macroeconomic trends and "**translates** the[ir] implications [...] for clients"; and

A. T. Kearney's GBPC is meant "to **decipher** sweeping geopolitical, economic, social, and technological changes and their effects on the global business environment", aiming, in particular, at "**helping CEOs and government leaders** anticipate and plan for the future". Roland Berger is even more blunt:

You want to know about recent developments and our take on, say, the digitization of your industry? We offer "INSIGHTS" and clear reasoning in our publications. With our Partners' straight-talking blog posts, with our newsworthy stories and topical dossiers, **we invite you to enter into a conversation with us.**

It is the IT-based consulting firms that have embraced the idea of creating specific, somewhat independent think tanks more fully – possibly because they were latecomers to consulting and had no tradition of "thought leadership", so had to build the corresponding reputation from scratch. Maybe the most typical or at least illustrative case in this respect is Accenture. It established a first think-tank like organization in 1996, when it was still operating as Andersen Consulting, the consulting arm of accounting and audit firm Arthur Andersen, originally founded in Chicago in 1913. It became Accenture in 2001 after drawn-out, and at times nasty divorce proceedings from Andersen, mediated by the International Chamber of Commerce. Here is how the firm described its think tank in one of its studies (Linder and Phelps 2000):

The ***Accenture Institute for Strategic Change*** conducts original research focused on issues of concern to senior management. The ISC was founded in 1996 to provide a center for Accenture Thought Leadership, to synthesize those insights with the work of other thought leaders, and to advance the state of the art with new, original research. Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Institute is made up of experienced management researchers working in concert with business educators and executives. All members of the research staff have advanced degrees, including seven with doctorates. Members of our staff have taught at MIT, Harvard, University of Chicago, New York University, University of Michigan, University of Texas, Babson, and Thunderbird Business Schools.

The quest for thought leadership is explicit and also apparent in the name of the institute, which combines the most “noble” of consulting areas, strategy, with Accenture’s actual and more nimble activities in changing organizations, largely with IT-based tools. The main proxy for such leadership is the apparent academic nature of its pursuits, “original research”, and the background of its “experienced management researchers”, not consultants, who hold degrees from the most well-known academic institutions in the US, as well as its location, Cambridge, MA, home to both MIT and Harvard. The business angle is still apparent given the focus “on issues of concern to senior management”, i.e. the purchasers of consulting services, and by referring to itself – at least for some time – as a “think and act tank”. And it became more pronounced over time, namely with subsequent name changes, briefly, around 2007, to Institute for High Performance Business and then, in 2011, to the current name: Accenture Institute for High Performance – in parallel with its advertising tagline at the time: “High performance. Delivered”. Accenture also created some other, ultimately short lived, think tanks: a “Government of the Future Centre”, jointly with the College of Europe and the Lisbon Council, as well as the “Accenture Institute for Health & Public Service Value”.

These targeted think tanks are clearly intended to demonstrate thought leadership in areas of significant commercial interest to the firm. Others have taken similar approaches. Thus, today’s largest firm, Deloitte Consulting (see Table 2 above), in 2010 created “GovLab” as its “flagship federal think tank and innovation center”, based, not surprisingly, in the Washington, D.C. area. It works through “fellows”, consultants on secondment, who “hope to improve and redefine federal government services, products, and processes through rigorous research that produces groundbreaking insights”. While their work is published in some of the leading practitioner oriented outlets such as the *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes* and *The Wall Street Journal*, Deloitte now also has its own “university press”, which “publishes original articles, reports, and periodicals that provide insights for businesses, the public sector, and NGOs” originating solely from within the organization or together with co-authors from academia and business (<https://dupress.deloitte.com/>) – a good example for the increasingly blurred boundaries between consulting, academia, and publishing (Engwall and Kipping 2006).

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) fields not just one, but three research institutes or “PwC think tanks” providing “primary research, analysis and, most importantly, *intelligence you can use*” (<http://www.pwc.com/us/en/publications/browse-by-institute.html>; emphasis in the original): the Center for technology and innovation (CTI), the Financial Services Institute (FSI), and the Health Research Institute (HRI) – apparently all staffed internally.

IBM, the largest consulting firm with a pure IT background, only has a single “think tank”: the Institute for Business Value (IBV), though it covers very similar sectors, viz. “Banking and Financial Services”, “Government, Healthcare”, and topics such as “Analytics”, “Cognitive computing”, “Digital Reinvention”. IBM officially entered consulting relatively late, in 1992, moving, with a stroke of a pen, 1,500 employees located in 30 countries into what was then named “IBM Consulting Group”. It grew fast and then doubled its size to about 30,000 by acquiring the consulting division of PwC in 2002, which the latter then rebuilt. The IBV itself was established in 2001, combining various initiatives addressing “hot” topics at the time: the IBM Institute of Knowledge Management, founded in 1999 as a consortium of various organizations; a small, internally driven and staffed e-business Innovation Institute; and parts of the Cambridge, MA-based digital business strategy consulting firm Mainspring, acquired that same year ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute\\_for\\_Business\\_Value](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_Business_Value)). What the IBV offers today is not much different from the other consulting firms, namely, to “discover emerging trends, business innovations and success patterns” by accessing the firm’s “thought leadership” through its reports, connecting “with forward thinkers at IBM”, and – maybe somewhat more unique – using its “open benchmark data” to “objectively” “evaluate business process performance” (<https://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/gbs/thoughtleadership/index.html>).

## **Summary and discussion**

The relationship between consulting and think tank activities is not a recent one. As the above overview has shown, it goes back to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has evolved over time

though, just as the management consulting industry has – just like the think tank space as well (Smith 1991; Abelson 2016). The consulting-related think tanks today are different from the ones a century ago and so is the focus of their activities. But there is some sedimentation, with certain earlier think tanks still among those listed in the McGann (2017) index, namely the Nomura and Mitsubishi Research Institutes. Some others are no longer related to the management consulting industry of today, in particular The Century Fund (TCF) and the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) – though they are still active as think tanks. The following table, provides a brief summary of the different types of consulting-related think tanks described in some more detail in the previous section.

**Table 4: Typology of consulting-related think tanks**

Period	Early 20 <sup>th</sup> century	Post-WWII	Late 20 <sup>th</sup> century
Pioneer(s)	Edward A. Filene (TCF)	Stanford Research Institute	McKinsey, BCG
Followers	Lyndall Urwick (IMI; UOP); Luther H. Gulick (IPA)	Nomura Research Institute; Mitsubishi Research Institute; Ambrosetti	Accenture; IBM; Deloitte; PwC
Main foci	Gain sharing; social peace; modernizing government	Long range planning; global competitive advantage; stakeholder management	Managerialization; disruption; national competitiveness
Rationale	Betterment	Knowledge sharing	Thought leadership

The broad picture that emerges is one not unfamiliar to those who have studied the history of management and the development of what has been called the “management knowledge industry” or “authorities on management”, of which consultants form an important part in addition to business schools and business media (see for details, Engwall et al. 2016). The trend is towards increasing commercialization, marketization and ultimately commodification. While in earlier periods those consultants involved in think tank-like activities or organizations had broader ambitions, for instance in terms of social peace, the objectives behind engaging in or

creating a think tank became increasingly narrower over time. The benefits became first restricted to those becoming a member in those organizations or paying a subscription for certain types of services or information. And today, the “insights” consultants are offering through their research reports and other think tank like activities are mainly meant to demonstrate “thought leadership” – a term that is ubiquitous across all of their websites, regardless of whether or not they have created permanent structures, have consultants or dedicated researchers carry out the work and disseminate it through reports or op-eds. The question then is, why do they want to appear like a think tank. Three tentative answers.

***It simply makes business sense:*** Whatever consultants do, as Engwall and Kipping (2002: 4) note succinctly, it has to come “in the guise of ‘knowledge’” – even if the ultimate aim of hiring a consultant is to simply reduce the workforce or for a CEO to up their status in addition to their global market share by entering emerging economies. So, writing reports that seem to predict the future based on what appears like “research”, validated through various proxies, becomes important in terms of convincing (potential) clients of the consulting firm’s superior knowledge, and ultimately outdo the competition from other consultants – hence the notion of thought **leadership**. At the same time, one can also explain these activities as a tool to create uncertainty or “fear” among top managers, which Kieser and others have argued to be the way consultants generate constant demand for their services (Kieser 2002; Ernst and Kieser 2002). Thus, by writing reports on automation in manufacturing, big data and the advent of Artificial Intelligence, to name but a few recent examples, consultants will make managers wonder, even worry how to deal with these developments – a concern to which the reports themselves provide at best generic answers, hence prompting managers to reach out to the consulting firm behind the think tank that alerted them to these ominous trends. Moreover, these reports also help open up new markets for the consultants, be they, other functional areas, different industries or emerging economies. Suffice to signal the relevant competence by providing deep “insights” to generate interest among potential clients and, ultimately, legitimacy for the solutions proposed to these clients. This leads to a second, broader motivation.

***It helps confirm and extend their “authority”:*** Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, “management” has gradually expanded its remit becoming almost ubiquitous with business schools, consultants, and media playing a crucial role in this expansion and asserting their own role as “authorities on management” in the process. In this context, consultants engaging in think tank-like activities could be seen as a way of extending their own particular authority even further, not only with actual and potential clients, but also compared to business schools and media. At first sight, all three seem actually engaged in mutually beneficial collaboration with consulting-related think tanks pointing to their academic advisors, the educational background of their researchers and the media referring to their reports and publishing their output as op-eds or in sponsored sections. However, a closer look suggests that this is but a thin “varnish” and that these think tanks might be able to dispense with it soon. Thus, consultants invariably refer to these activities as “research” even if most of them won’t meet even basic academic/scientific standards; and Deloitte has even launched its own “university press”. Business schools might have created an opportunity for these developments by insisting on conducting management research based on a natural science model that makes it largely inaccessible to practitioners (e.g. Zald 1993) – pushing the latter to lap up the “insights” offer by the consultants and their think tanks. This quest for even more authority leads us to a third point.

***It contributes to their growing hegemony:*** At least for the earliest consulting-related think tanks discussed above there seems no doubt that they aimed to go beyond business and attempted to influence society and polity with the intention to modernize and make it better – though with an open question whether they succeeded. What if the current ones are actually aiming to do the same – an idea not too far-fetched, given the earlier and ongoing involvement of the same consulting firms in the reshaping of employment, health and education systems (see Kipping and Wright 2012). These might be aiming for “betterment”, with some of the efforts regarding sustainability as an example (see above) or the efforts of the current McKinsey managing director in terms of “capitalism for the long-term” (Barton 2011; Barton et al. 2016; see also [fcltglobal.com](http://fcltglobal.com)) – even if these efforts, it should be pointed out, largely take place at the margin of the consulting firm and its think tank. More importantly, whatever their attempts at



broader reforms, manifest in the think tank activities, they ultimately aim for reasserting the capitalist system by reforming it, which is why Kipping et al. (2016) have referred to them as “agents of capitalism”. One could even paint a more sinister picture when combining the think tank activities with the way consulting “alumni” have come to occupy positions of influence and power not only in business firms but also within politics and academia (David and Kipping 2018) – possibly pointing to hegemonic tendencies, whether accidental or intentional.

This has been an initial attempt to survey and assess the involvement of management consultants in think tank like activities from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to today. Much more in-depth and systematic research is required to confirm, modify or reject the highly tentative conclusions reached here.

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