

T08P05 / Corporations and Think Tanks: Knowledge Utilization Beyond Political Technocracy

Topic : T08 / Policy Discourse and Critical Policy Research

Chair : Dieter Plehwe (Universität Kassel)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The critical examination of political dimensions of expert knowledge has been an important pillar of the argumentative turn literature. The founding volume contained a chapter by Fischer (1993), which explained the relevance of think tanks for the succession of and competition between political technocracies in the United States. Less attention has been paid to the socio-economic background and the social co-production of think tank based expertise (but compare Medvetz 2010 on early think tanks, Jane Meyer's 2016 "Dark Money" on recent influence). The literature on think tanks in any case can be strengthened if we explore the relationship between corporations and think tanks systematically including the place of commercial think tanks and non-commercial efforts of such think tanks that overlap with consulting business, the roles of think tanks in corporate lobby efforts at different levels (company, groups of businesses, industries etc.). More insights need to be gained with regard to the various ways in which corporations influence think tanks (funding, project finance, board membership, revolving door practices, networks etc.)

Fischer, Frank, 1993, Policy Discourse and the Politics of Washington Think Tanks. In: Fischer, Frank, Forrester, John, eds., The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning. Duke University Press

Medvetz, Tom, 2012, Think Tanks in America. University of Chicago Press

Jane Mayer, 2016, Dark Money. The hidden history of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right. Doubleday

CALL FOR PAPERS

Surprisingly, the role of corporations has not been sufficiently focused on in critical think tank studies so far in particular outside the United States. In light of recent reports on the role of even highly respected think tanks like Brookings for corporate lobby efforts (NYT 7.8.2016), the well-known strategies of oil companies like Exxon to use free market think tanks to nourish climate change skepticism, or the ways in which soft drink giants employ think tanks in their effort to prevent public health measures we can speak of a growing need to more closely study the links between political and corporate technocracy. The panel invites scholars to submit papers that explore the broad range and complexity of the corporate think tank nexus at the level of individual corporations, groups of companies or industries, nationally and internationally. Apart from the role of think tanks as corporate lobby tools papers will be considered inter alia that address the role of think tanks for broader firm strategies (e.g. the pro-bono research consulting firms or the future studies of re-insurance companies), or broader corporate strategies (e.g. free market campaigns, austerity perspectives), the variety of think tank efforts financed (and directed to greater or lesser extent) by corporations, the diverse links between corporations and think tanks (like board membership, revolving doors etc.), or the relations between corporations and different types of think tanks (like academic, partisan, commercial, political party, advocacy etc.).

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Session 1 Corporations and Think Tanks

Friday, June 30th 13:45 to 15:45 (Manasseh Meyer MM 2 - 1)

Corporations and think tanks in Germany

Dieter Plehwe (Universität Kassel)

Corporations and think tanks in Germany

Typical typologies of think tanks distinguish between academic, political party related, commercial, advocacy and partisan think tanks. The mushrooming population of think tanks can thereby be distinguished and sorted according to major tasks like academic research across the many disciplines and normative orientations (pluralist science), evidence based policy advice committed to party perspectives, a wide range of contract and / or for profit research and related services (including lobby assistance), usually quite specialized campaign and cause related research services (much of it progressive, but conservative and reactionary causes are frequently overlooked) and research and other activities dedicated to specific world views (in distinction to political party related ideology, prime example: neoliberal think tanks), respectively. Typologies are tricky, of course. Many think tanks do not fit neatly into just one bracket. A critical political knowledge perspective would reject the attempt to separate academic and other research efforts on epistemological grounds (without denying frequently considerable differences between academic and non-academic research), because all knowledge is to be considered political, science based or not. While think tank network studies can be employed to overcome some of the problems of the typological approach by way of examination of the multiple links between think tanks categorized in different brackets (compare Plehwe 2015), common logics of constituencies (like specific business interests linking academic and political or partisan think tanks) still sort business interests in a selective manner. Foregrounded are specific links between interests and ideas of particular corporations and knowledge / expertise operations, not corporate (or class) interests as a whole (compare the otherwise excellent study of Mayer 2016 on the Koch empire and allies in the U.S.).

A more general (more structural, less agency oriented) approach to business and think tanks thus requires a broader effort dedicated first to a rather simple question: Which relations do corporations maintain with think tanks? How did and do they develop? What can we say about the corporation think tank nexus considering the corporate class as a whole? While such a perspective should be aware of competing and conflicting business-think tank relations (e.g. renewable energy fighting fossil fuel energy interests or business supporting competing political parties) in order to not draw problematic conclusions with regard to the ruling capacities of the corporate class, the resulting picture can also be considered a likely antidote against neo-pluralist world views. We simply need to know more about the multiple linkages and involvements of corporations in the machinations of knowledge-power regimes. Germany as a case is treated as an open variety of capitalism due to its intricate relationship with other European varieties and the supranational institutional structure of the EU.

Mayer, Jane, 2016, *Dark Money*, New York: Anchor

Plehwe, Dieter, 2015, The politics of policy think-tanks: organizing expertise, legitimacy and counter-expertise in policy networks , in: Frank Fischer, Douglas Torgerson, Anna Durnová, and Michael Orsini (eds.) *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, Edgar Elgar, 358-379

Studying Think Tank Integration: Examples From Canada

Julien Landry (University of Alberta)

Think tanks inspire both confidence and ambivalence in the popular imagination. Some see their position outside of government and universities as a mark of their autonomy from both scholastic musings and the interests of the State. Others view think tanks with suspicion and equate their work with a form of ideological

predation destined to uphold the views of billionaires and corporations. The label “think tank” is also used to describe other organizational forms (e.g. university centers, consulting firms, government bodies) that do not always correspond to more established archetypes. This diversity and these ambiguities have complicated both the characterization of think tanks and the formulation of comprehensive research programs pertaining to their role and organization. These difficulties have typically been addressed with typologies that attempt to formalize the differences between think tanks, but their limitations as analytical tools are well known. More recent studies have utilized sociological theory (notably field theory) to allow these variations to become the subject of empirical investigation. Building on these initiatives and on the broader literature, I argue that the difference between think tanks can be understood when we account for the modality of their integration within distinct and differentiated communities—i.e. networks from which they draw board members, personnel, contacts, money, outlets, prestige and other resources. By using historical and contemporary examples taken from the Canadian context, I will demonstrate how spaces of discourse production and reproduction, such as think tanks, are governed by their role within these communities and by the composition and cohesion of the networks that support them. This can inform how we study and compare not only the relationships between think tanks and corporations but between think tanks and other social groups as well.

Corporate Masters of Climate Denial: The invisible hand of the fossil fuel industry in orchestrating the anti-science agenda, practices and strategies of think tanks – an Australian case study

Elaine McKewon (University of Technology Sydney)

It has been well-documented that neoliberal think tanks have played a key role in the construction of the false scientific controversy over the reality, causes and potential consequences of climate change. Fossil fuel corporations such as Exxon have been exposed as a major source of funding for these think tanks, whose attacks on climate science have successfully delayed or avoided climate change mitigation policies designed to reduce or phase out the use of fossil fuels. However, beyond funding, the extent of corporate influence on think tanks remains relatively under-researched.

This paper presents the results of an Australian case study in which executives of the fossil fuel, mining and energy industries have authored and directed the agenda, practices and strategies of the Institute of Public Affairs - the primary think tank that constructed the false scientific controversy over climate change in Australia. These corporate actors did not survey the marketplace of independent neoliberal think tanks and engage a consultant organisation with the requisite expertise and resources to manage the perceived threats of climate science and proposed climate change mitigation policies. On the contrary, they built capacity in a think tank in order to direct a long-term war-by-proxy on the scientific field with the aim of neutralising authoritative scientific knowledge and the undesirable policies it informs. Furthermore, there is evidence that the ‘corporate masters of climate denial’ in Australia duplicated the successful strategies deployed by their counterparts in the United States.

The study pieces together the transnational network of fossil fuel interests and public relations firms that co-produced the blueprint for constructing the false scientific controversy over climate change in the US and Australia. This transnational network is mapped out and its blueprint detailed using primary documents including: internal memos between public relations firms and the tobacco and fossil fuel industries; think tank annual reports, strategic plans and funding declarations; and transcripts of think tank testimony provided to government hearings.

Think Tanks and Management Consultants: An Emergent Nexus?

Matthias Kipping (Schulich School of Business, York University)

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. Only recently has the nexus between think tanks and business found more interest, namely around the ways corporations seem to have instrumentalized them to influence policy debates and decisions around topics that affect them, including for instance climate change (Plehwe, 2014), or on creating a generally more favourable climate for ‘free markets’ as part of what looks like a coordinated effort by the neo-liberal think tanks and think tank networks (e.g. Djelic, 2014). By contrast, so far little is known about how think tanks might have influenced corporations and their policies or operations themselves.

Some indication for the current importance of think tanks targeting their efforts prominently (albeit not exclusively) on business can be found in the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report (McGann, 2016), where those linked to the large management consulting firms occupy prominent positions on the list of “Best

For Profit Think Tanks” (Table 28), with the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) ranked first with nine more also making the top 20. Quite tellingly, the MGI, which was founded in 1990, is also listed at rank 84 among the “Top International Development Think Tanks” (Table 22) and the “Top International Economics Think Tanks” (Table 23), ranked 52nd. How and why management consultants inserted themselves into this space remains to be explored. This paper takes a first step in that direction by pursuing three interconnected aims:

First it provides a largely descriptive overview of the various think tanks created by the large management consulting firms, listing their basic characteristics, including the year of foundation, their evolution, their modus operandi (i.e. with own research staff, consulting staff or subcontractors) as well as the topics covered and how these changed over time – or not (based on a list of their publications).

Second, it will try to uncover the historical roots and development of what superficially appears like a recent phenomenon. Take The Twentieth Century Fund, now The Century Foundation, which was among the earliest think tanks, originally established in 1919 (Smith, 1991). During the interwar period, played an important and varied role in promoting and disseminating scientific management in the United States and globally (Engwall et al., 2016). Or the Stanford Research Institute, which was highly active and successful in spreading organizational innovation, including the decentralized multidivisional structure or M-form, during the post-WWII decades and also directly contributed to the establishment of the Nomura Research Institute (ibid.) – now no. 5 on the above mentioned “Best For Profit Think Tanks” list.

Last not least, the paper will offer a more systematic categorization of the various types of relationships and interactions between think tanks and management consultants over time. This might ultimately lead to questioning the current separation of the research on both phenomena and, possibly, require a modification of the extant periodization of their respective evolution (see, e.g., Abelson, 2016; Kipping, 2002).