T07P13 / Think-tanks in Action: A Comparative Perspective

Topic : T07 / Policy Design, Policy Analysis, Expertise and Evaluation

Chair : Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Department of Social and Policy Sciences)

Second Chair : Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

Third Chair : Enrique Mendizabal (On Think Tanks)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

In the past thirty years, think-tanks have attracted considerable attention within public debate and academia. Within the social and political sciences academics have attempted to classify these organisations, trace their development in specific polities, and understand their role and impact on party politics and public policy.

Though important, this scholarship has overlooked two key areas of research. First, the wider literature tends to neglect how think-tanks conduct their daily activities and make knowledge claims (McLevey, 2014). Secondly, researchers have often failed to investigate intellectual life within think-tanks, and have tended to present a simplistic image of the expert-cum-political advisor, or the elite puppet (Medvetz, 2012). This is due, in part, to previous scholarship's cursory appreciation of the interstitial location of think-tanks between academia, the media, business, and politics. As such, we concur with Plehwe's observation that think-tanks remain "the most arcane and least understood" aspect of the policy-interest nexus (Plehwe, 2014, p. 108).

In response, this panel's prime objective is to facilitate deeper reflections on the hybrid mode of intellectualism associated with think-tanks. Our session's second objective is to stimulate research which focusses on the actual practices of think-tanks. Such an approach has invigorated research within the sociology of knowledge (Camic, Gross & Lamont, 2011), and we expect to encourage similar developments within the field of think-tank studies. Concomitantly, our third objective is to act as a hub for interdisciplinary learning, bringing together contributions from across the social and political sciences as well as science and technology studies.

Finally, this panel will make a significant contribution to the comparative study of knowledge regimes (Campbell & Pedersen, 2011). Think-tanks operate across the globe, yet the knowledge regime literature has tended to concentrate on a select group of Euro-American polities. This panel seeks contributions from the developing world alongside those from developed/Anglo-American studies. Secondly, the distinct focus on think-tanks and their intellectual practices in action is novel approach, as studies of regimes have predominantly taken a historical perspective. In sum, we aim to expand the scholarly understanding of knowledge regimes by illuminating how policy-knowledge actors, in this case think-tanks, navigate their institutional landscape, and how this landscape shapes their practice.

References

Camic, C., Gross, N., & Lamont, M. (2011). Social knowledge in the making. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press,.

Campbell, J., & Pedersen, O. (2011). Knowledge Regimes and Comparative Political Economy. In D. Béland & R. H. Cox (Eds.), Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research. Oxford University Press.

McLevey, J. (2014). Think Tanks, Funding, and the Politics of Policy Knowledge in Canada. Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie, 51:1, 54–75.

Medvetz, T. (2012). Think tanks in America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Plehwe, D. (2014). Think tank networks and the knowledge–interest nexus: the case of climate change. Critical Policy Studies, 8:1, 101–115.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Notoriously hard to define, the diverse and murky organisations referred to as think-tanks continue to be both significant and controversial actors in policy development across the globe. Interest in these groups stems from their institutional ambidexterity. At once a think-tank can be found to hold prominent positions within policy networks while seen to have dependencies on public, private, and third sector donors. Similarly, think-tanks might stress their relationships with academia and their alignment with political parties or ideological cliques within such groups. Hence, think-tanks are simultaneously referred to as case studies

of benign knowledge brokers and smoke-screens for elite interests.

Irrespective of their scholarly or political dispositions, in order to achieve public legitimacy and policy relevance, think-tanks and their employees must continually perform professional competencies spanning academia, politics, media, and business. This raises the following questions:

- How do think-tanks perform this hybrid intellectualism?
- How do they create knowledge?
- How might differing national contexts with their particular media, political, business, and academic ecologies influence these activities?

The panel will address these questions by focussing on the practices of think-tanks and their staff. Specifically, we invite contributions which illuminate:

- the construction, maintenance, and deployment of interpersonal/inter-organisational networks from across the policy-knowledge-media-business nexus
- the processes and politics of knowledge production including, fundraising and research dissemination
- the rhetorical strategies which are devised and enacted through a think-tank's public and/or private interventions

We encourage both theoretical and empirical submissions, studies which reflect upon specific organisations, networks or individuals, and will accept submissions about think-tanks from across the organisational and ideological spectrum. The panel does not have a specific regional focus, but we particularly encourage scholars with interests in think-tanks of the MENA, Latin American, or East Asian regions to submit.

T07P13 / Think-tanks in Action: A Comparative Perspective

Chair : Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Department of Social and Policy Sciences)

Second Chair : Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

Third Chair : Enrique Mendizabal (On Think Tanks)

Session 1Think-tank traditions and knowledge regimes

Wednesday, June 28th 14:00 to 16:00 (Block B 4 - 2)

Discussants

Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Department of Social and Policy Sciences)

Exploring the policy-social science nexus through the history of Chilean think tanks

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

This paper traces the convoluted relationship between social science and politics in Chile during the period between 1979-2012, particularly as seen through the prism of think tanks. It focuses on Chile given its relevance as a case-study of processes of democratisation and free-market reform and its central locus as a node for socio-scientific research on the continent. It spans the above-mentioned timeframe to cover the first signs of a reborn public policy debate guided by technocratic ideals under conditions of political repression, and the aftermath of a major political crisis that put the post-Pinochet political system, and its technocratic underpinnings, under mounting criticism.

Inspired by Thomas Medvetz's Bourdieusian framework, this contribution understands think tanks as 'boundary organisations' operating across the social fields of academia, politics, the media and economics. However, how these institutions negotiate the boundaries of the above-mentioned fields is not arbitrary. Hence, one finds that how technocratic ideals are defined and valued varies across the years under consideration, depending especially on the political landscape. For instance, under Pinochet, even if political parties were proscribed and political participation was severely repressed, socio-scientific research could only be tolerated by a regime avid of technocratic legitimacy. Thus, the first hints of a new political debate were structured around heavily academic think tanks funded by international foundations – which in turned gave the infrastructure for the formation of the elite of 'technopols' that lead the country during the the Concertacion years (1990-2010). In Bourdieusian terms, a 'scientific' field sheltered the birth of a 'political' one.

In the following decades, Chile saw the r of a new generation of party-linked think-tanks and experts, which along with institutions such as CEP maintained a certain dominance in the policy-science nexus. Nevertheless, as the technocratic ideals of the past became increasingly under question, a new generation of experts and organisations became ever more willing to debate publicly, both for and against, the normative underpinnings of Chile's neoliberal development model.

Think tanks in different political systems: A comparative study of British and Iranian policy think tanks

Seyed Mohamad Sadegh Emamian (Tehran Polytechnic University, GPTT,)

The definition, the size, the level of influence and the types of policy think tanks vary substantially in different political contexts. Those characteristics depend on the nature of political system in terms of the level of openness that provides think tanks' access to policy process, the financial system that policy think tanks could benefit from, the legal platforms that those institutions would be based upon and the legitimacy that amplifies their voice to be heard.

This study comparatively investigates the extent and the way that two substantially different political

systems frame the characteristics of policy think tanks. On the one hand, Britain enjoys from a set of great potentials to be seen as the European hub of the most influential policy think tanks. The British liberalism, the close US-UK ties, a more developed civil society and access to London as “the Global City” are examples of advantages for the development of policy think tanks in the UK. Nevertheless, another set of constraining characteristics might limit such an expansion. The centralised-majoratarian government, the disciplined Parliamentary party system, a relatively secretive and close policy process, the existence of a permanent neutral civil service and the lack of access to financial resources, at least compared to the US, are of those disadvantageous features of the British political system. On the other hand, Iran is a developing country that is characterised by a fundamentally different political system: the presidential system with a clear distinction of power, a highly politicised and close policy process as well as a less developed civil society and policy communities. Nonetheless, there is a growing wave of creating policy think tanks in order to influence the process of policymaking. This fact gives rise to an interesting research question about the relationship between the nature of political system and the main characteristics of policy think tanks there. This is the main question that this research tries to focus on.

This paper relies on almost 15 semi-constructed interviews with directors and senior advisors of several main London-based policy think tanks, from political parties-affiliated think tanks to those in which they are domestically apolitical, cross-party or internationally influential. In comparison, the British cases have been critically studied against an analysis of mainly newly-established and government dependent Iranian thin tanks on the basis of around 12 conducted interviews.

Does Revolving Door Matter? The Effects of Job Mobility on Think Tanks in China

Xufeng Zhu (Tsinghua University)

“Revolving door” has always been regarded as an essential factor for the prosperity of American think tanks. However, whether revolving door matters for non-American think tanks remains unaddressed. I evaluate the effects of revolving door (career mobility of think tank leaders) in China based on a nationwide think tank survey and interview data the author has conducted. I contend that, because of the traditional Chinese Confucian culture and the “official standard” society, revolving door does not have any positive contributions to Chinese think tank influence and revenue. Moreover, revolving door significantly negatively affects the personal social networks of think tankers. Heterogeneous analysis and propensity score matching are conducted to present the robustness of the regression results. The research findings contradict the traditional doctrines regarding the effects of cross-sectoral career mobility and therefore motivate us to review such principles.

T07P13 / Think-tanks in Action: A Comparative Perspective

Chair : Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Department of Social and Policy Sciences)

Second Chair : Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

Third Chair : Enrique Mendizabal (On Think Tanks)

Session 2'Think-tankery': the work of think-tanks and think-tank intellectuals

Wednesday, June 28th 16:15 to 18:15 (Block B 4 - 2)

Discussants

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Department of Social and Policy Sciences)

Think Tanks and Public Policy: Building Bridges or Creative Destruction? A practitioner's account

Ali Salman (IDEAS)

This paper provides a practitioner's account of how independent think tanks generate resources, set agenda and operate in Asian context. It reviews the literature published on think tanks while responding to the criticism on the influence of think tanks. The paper includes a comparison of two case studies- public policy advocacy projects from IDEAS (Malaysia) and PRIME (Pakistan). The findings largely conform to the ODI's Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach while suggesting a modified version of the model to capture the success. The paper discusses peculiar challenges faced by think tanks in developing countries and builds up an entrepreneurship-centric explanation of influence of think tanks. It suggests an alternative lens to understand the effectiveness of think tanks. Towards the end, the paper identifies future course of action for think tanks.

Evaluating Public Policy in Brazil: bridging the gap between university and government

Aline Hellmann (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul - UFRGS)

This paper gives an account of one type of Think Tank that has been consequential in bridging the gap between policy evaluation and scientific applied research in Brazil. The selected case study is the Center for International Studies on Government (CEGOV), which is located at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). It develops studies and research projects on governmental affairs from a comparative and applied perspective. The Center gathers researchers from several departments of the University, such as Economics, Political Science, Law, Administration, International Relations, Education, Urbanism, and Computer Science. Such multidisciplinary teams are specialized in a range of public policy areas, such as Health, Education, Sports, Public Security, Foreign Affairs and Defense. CEGOV is chaired by a Director, and its policies and priorities are determined by an Advisory Board and a Scientific Board with representation from both the scientific and policymaking communities. The activities of the Center are undertaken by working groups, which take the responsibility for specific projects. Currently, CEGOV has twelve fully established and operating working groups. The Center's researchers work on multidisciplinary projects covering the fields of international politics and governance, monitoring and evaluation of public policies, institutional development, Brazilian and South-American economy, comparative institutional design and decision-making processes, as well as public management, democratic controls and decentralization of public services. The Center is a place for interaction among scholars from UFRGS and other academic institutions, highlighting its multidisciplinary and open nature, as well as its vocation to collaborative applied research. Being a reference for research on comparative governmental studies, CEGOV has offered in the last five years a wide range of extracurricular activities such as extension and specialization courses (under- and graduate level), and advisory activities. More than twenty thousand government officials and civil servants from all levels of government have participated in such activities, making CEGOV one of the main Think Thanks on public policies in Brazil.

Think tank for educational policy: Bridging the missing link of MOE and NAER in Taiwan

Yi-Hua Lai (Soochow University)

Pursuing evidence-based governance and informed decisions, the role of research in governmental practices is crucial. However, findings from knowledge utilization indicate that there is a dysfunctional divide between knowledge and policy. In Taiwan, the missing link also exists in the Ministry of Education (MOE), paradoxically with it's think tank: the National Academic for Educational Research (NAER). Former research found that although NAER has conducted research commissioned by MOE every year, the results and suggestions seldom be adopted.

This research aims to understand the status quo of knowledge utilization and the relationship between MOE and NAER, explore the problems, and propose solutions to bridge the missing link. Findings shows that there is really a gap between the two communities, mainly because of the problematic research quality, political concerns and effects, and the ill communication and relationship. To solve the problems, this study examines the role of think tank in educational policy, and provides suggestions for each community. It is hoped that insights from the work reported here will benefit the function of think tanks in educational public policy making.

Keywords: think tank, educational policy, knowledge utilization