P06 / Think Tank Discourse and Political Change: Strategies, Identities, and Shifting Political Tides

Topic : POLICY DISCOURSE AND CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

Chair : Julien Landry (University of Alberta)

Second Chair : Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Scholarly work on think tanks – or policy institutes – has integrated important insights from the argumentative turn literature (e.g. Fischer 1991, 1993). Research on think tanks has also advanced our understanding of their social embeddedness (e.g. Medvetz 2012; Stone 2007), their connections to specific allies (e.g. Plehwe 2014), and the part they play in discourse coalitions and other policy formations (e.g. Pautz 2012; Plehwe 2017). Drawing on these ideas, current scholarship has also analyzed how think tanks react discursively to events that challenge dominant policy paradigms (Hernando, Pautz, and Stone 2018).

We believe that this integration of research on think tanks, networks, discourse production, and policy environments is encouraging and should be sustained. It should also be harnessed to better understand how think tanks with different interests, allies, and political identities adapt to the reconfiguration of national and transnational political landscapes. Conceivably, these changes may move debates away from traditional think tank concerns (e.g. economic policy, international relations) towards new priorities (e.g. multicultural politics, migration policy) and reorganize the fault lines by which think tanks identify political allies and potential funders. Moreover, the reliance of think tanks on the political environment may go beyond policy preferences and extend to changes in the authority of expert discourse in the public sphere as well as to the opportunities and constraints these changes can entail (cf. Drezner 2017). As think tanks become involved in contentious or polarized political debates, they can gain new allies but risk devaluating their own credibility (Rich 2004). Likewise, the general value attributed to policy expertise can shape incentives for developing analytical capabilities and choosing dissemination strategies. A better understanding of how think tanks from the left, right, and center contribute to shifting political realities and navigate their consequences (e.g. through agenda setting, argumentation, network building, workshopping, or dissemination) will allow us to gleam at how strategies and political identities mediate think tank behavior within dynamic policy environments.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Research into the social, political, and discursive dimensions of think tank behavior has gained steam in recent years—especially regarding the study of conservative policy organizations. These have allowed three important themes to converge 1) think tank allies and constituencies, 2) policy discourse production, and 3) shifting political circumstances. However, there is a need to extend research to more recent political developments, comparable historical examples, and a broader mix of think tank political identities—i.e. to study how think tanks from the right, left, and center have engaged with historical and contemporary political change. This panel invites scholars to submit papers exploring the social, cultural, political, and economic intricacies of how think tanks contribute and adapt to broader political circumstances—be they regional, national, or international—or fail to do so. Papers to be considered will comprise theoretical or empirical research into the relations between think tanks, policy experts and broader political change (e.g. shifting policy paradigms, renegotiated partisan identities, emergent populist discursive strategies, evolving valuations of expert discourse, reconfigured political landscapes). Relevant topics can include the contribution of think tanks to political trends, their strategies for navigating these trends, the outcomes of these strategies, the discourse they produce in such contexts, and the impact of institutional environments, interests, and political identities on think tanks’ behaviors, strategies, and outcomes relative to political change.

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Session 1

Friday, June 28th 14:00 to 16:00 (MB S1.105)

Discussants

Julien Landry (University of Alberta)

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

The Rashomon Effect and the economic crisis: British think tanks after 2008.

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando (TASC)

This paper presents the main findings of my doctoral research – hopefully published as a book (Palgrave) by the time of the conference – that compares the parallel transformations of four British think tanks from across the political spectrum between 2007 and 2013: the New Economics Foundation (centre-left, environmentalist); Adam Smith Institute (pro free-markets; National Institute of Economic and Social Research (technocratic ethos); Policy Exchange (closely linked to a party of government).

By interviewing staff members and analysing changes in their financial accounts, organisational structure, publications, and perceived political impact I examined think tanks' attempts to be influential in moments when expert advice is ever more demanded, if also more mistrusted.

This presentation also draws inspiration from Akira Kurosawa's Rashomon: diverging narratives of putatively the same event evince the pitfalls of relying on only one of them, lay bare the precarious relationship between the past and how actors approach it, and showcase that narratives often save face for those who narrate them.

Ultimately, the demands for epistemic authority that arose after the crisis energised the work of all four think tanks, while exposing internal tensions, affecting their sources of funding, transforming their institutional structure and tinging how they engage with their publics. Faced with these pressures and in a context of ubiquitous mistrust, I argue that the political import of seeming moderate – and of seeking to define what 'moderation' meant – framed the intellectual dynamics of these organisations.

Think-tank coalitions and crisis: A social network analysis of authorship, funding, and advice networks of British think-tanks 2006 - 2018

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

In light of the ongoing financial downturn and the emergence of a 'post truth politics', commentators have been quick to claim that the policy intellectuals associated with think-tanks and policy research institutes are in crisis. This crisis is presented as a symbolic disaster, where the think-tank and policy intellectual has a lost or dented their legitimacy and authority. Though narrative of crisis is pervasive, less is known about the material changes to policy intellectual life and on policy knowledge production. In response, this paper investigates how (if at all) a time of crisis has effected the British knowledge-policy nexus. Through a social network analysis of British think-tanks engaged in social policy research, I assess the impact of crisis on the financial and symbolic resources, and the changing intellectual teams that support think-tanks and vouch for their ideas.

Existing analysis of think-tanks and crisis have tended to focus upon the discursive response of policy research institutes, privilege specific party based cliques, and use relational approaches metaphorically,

rather than analytically. In contrast, this paper employs relational theory and methods to develop a novel community-wide approach to study the coalitions, alliances and resources of think-tanks within the knowledge-policy nexus. This represents a significant contribution to academic understanding of think-tanks, political-intellectual crisis, policy intellectual coalitions and the wider literature related to contemporary intellectual life.

Italian think tanks after the populist wave

Mattia Diletti (Sapienza - Università di Roma)

Think tanks are a relatively new phenomenon for Italy (Radaelli, 1998; Diletti, 2011). There are around a hundred of them, and nearly half were started after 2004 (Diletti and Di Giammaria 2014). This paper documents the results of the second survey conducted on Italian think tanks in the last decade. In the first survey, conducted in 2011, four reasons were identified to explain their sudden success: 1) the emergence of new models of governance, which has increased the access of experts into the decision-making process, 2) the breaking-up of parties organization, which has allowed the creation of «personal» think tanks, 3) the strategic use of think tanks by interest groups 4) the fragmentation of some important policy areas, which opened up new opportunities for those who were able to offer expertise to policy communities.
A research team from “Sapienza - Università di Roma” recently conducted a new survey on Italian think tank management, focused on understanding what happened to the world of Italian think tanks after 1. the economic crisis of the beginning of the decade, 2. the short “Renzi era”, in which the former Prime Minister transformed the center-left camp, 3. the electoral victory of two populist parties, such as the Movimento 5 Stelle and Lega, which then formed a new government.

The last point is the most relevant: the anti-elitism of populist leaders, parties and movements usually includes the dimension of anti-intellectualism, whether it be against public intellectuals or against experts involved in decision-making processes. The institutionalization of populist parties and leaders could shape a new relationship between “Populists in power” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2014) and think tanks. If we assume that contemporary populism has actively engaged in a politics of regime transformation (de la Torre and Peruzzotti, 2018), we must also take into account that it could employ intellectuals and policy experts in order to reach its goals. In the first case, intellectuals could have a role in legitimizing the system of ideas supporting the choices of parties and leaders who express the “popular will”, in the second case policy experts and think tanks would help to reach the goal of delivering policy proposals.
The first results of the research seem to show that think tanks represent an asset also for populist parties. In the case of the Lega, some think tanks have collaborated on the reform of the pensions system, approved in January 2019. In the case of Movimento 5 Stelle, they work to make their policy proposals legitimate in the eyes of a wider audience. On the other hand, it will be interesting to observe the strategies of adaptation of traditional think tanks to a completely new political context.

The Epistemology of Think Tanks: Against an Organization-Centric Assessment

François Claveau (Université de Sherbrooke)
Andreanne Veillette (Université de Sherbrooke)

Think tanks are often characterized as independent laboratories of ideas, free from the constraints that rest on governmental or academic research. While this is technically true, think tanks actually rely heavily on different actors for their continued existence (Landry, 2017). Think tanks face the combined challenge of impressing donors, influencing politicians, swaying the public opinion through the media all the while conserving a credibility akin to the one usually bestowed upon academia (Medvetz, 2012). Think tanks, unlike traditional intellectuals, are incentivized to produce concise research for precise purposes and specific moments (McGann, 2016). Put simply, think tanks need to influence while intellectuals want to influence (Drezner, 2017). This state of affairs makes for a most interesting object of study from the viewpoint of social epistemology. But how should we evaluate the knowledge production and transmission of think tanks?

Most evaluations of think tanks take each organization as a unit. The goal of the assessment becomes a ranking of organizations according to a set of criteria meant to capture what an ideal think tank would look like. Based on a survey of such evaluations, we diagnose a shared assumption: it would be up to each think tank to reinvent itself and strive to get closer to the ideal organization.

We contend that this assumption is flawed. Think tanks are shaped by external incentives and norms. Pointing the finger at specific organizations misses the mark by ignoring the central role structural elements play in determining a think tank’s characteristics. Furthermore, if one think tank reinvents itself, it leaves behind a niche, attracting other think tanks in its stead. A social epistemology of think tanks should thus

avoid being organization-centric. To replace this type of evaluation, we propose to shift the focus to the ecosystem of think tanks – i.e., the collection of entities of various sectors (media, academia, business, politics, bureaucracy) that interact with think tanks. Building on Medvetz's approach to the space of think tanks and on existing, unsystematic assessments of the ecosystem (e.g., Drezner's recent contribution), we develop a framework to proceed to a more rigorous social epistemology of think tanks.

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Structure or agency in think tank political change?

Julien Landry (University of Alberta)

The effects of political change on the fortunes of think tanks can credibly depend upon how that change relates to the political position of these organizations—opening new opportunities and closing old ones depending on the nature and consistency of that position. But what are the movers of political change within those think tanks that have adjusted their research priorities or policy preferences at times of shifting political tides? What can these changes tell us about the nature of think tank autonomy or lack thereof? In this paper, I will draw on historical examples from Canada to examine both strategic organizational adjustments and shifting researcher perspectives and assess their sensitivity to how think tanks integrate social space—i.e. their liaison to a niche with specific social properties. I will then evaluate the extent to which this evidence suggests that the evolution of think tanks is overdetermined, or not, by pre-existing structural factors and the broader changes these endure. The importance of this question will be stressed as it brings to the fore the issue of whether think tanks are agents of their own destiny or epiphenomena of more powerful social forces—both at the organizational level and at the level of the think tank community. A related line of questioning could also address the margins of learning and discovery that are available to think tanks. From there, ethnographic observations or ethnographically motivated histories are suggested and explored as potential means to examine sites and moments where the political identities and intellectual positioning of think tanks are still at stake and open to negotiation.