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.

Drezner, Daniel W. 2017. The ideas industry. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fischer, Frank. 1991. “American Think Tanks: Policy Elites and the Politicization of Expertise.” Governance 4(3): 332–353.

Fischer, Frank. 1993. “Policy Discourse and the Politics of Washington Think Tanks.” In The Argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning, eds. Frank Fischer and John Forester. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p. 21–42.

Hernando, Marcos Gonzalez, Hartwig Pautz, and Diane Stone. 2018. “Think tanks in ‘hard times’ – the Global Financial Crisis and economic advice.” Policy and Society 37(2): 125–139.

Medvetz, Thomas. 2012. Think tanks in America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pautz, Hartwig. 2012. Think tanks, social democracy and social policy. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Plehwe, Dieter. 2017. “The Politics of Policy Think-Tanks: organizing expertise, legitimacy and counter-expertise in policy networks.” In Handbook of critical policy studies, eds. Frank Fischer et al. Cheltenham; Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 358–379.

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

Rich, Andrew. 2004. Think tanks, public policy, and the politics of expertise. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stone, Diane. 2007. “Recycling bins, garbage cans or think tanks? Three myths regarding policy analysis institutes.” Public Administration 85(2): 259–278.

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)

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)

Italian think tanks after the populist wave

Mattia Diletti (Sapienza - Università di Roma)

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

François Claveau (Université de Sherbrooke)

Andreanne Veillette (Université de Sherbrooke)

Structure or agency in think tank political change?

Julien Landry (University of Alberta)