

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.

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Session 1 Think-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)

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

Seyed Mohamad Sadegh Emamian (GPTT, Sharif University of Technology)

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

Xufeng Zhu (Tsinghua University)

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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)

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

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

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

Yi-Hua Lai (Soochow University)