

## Bibliographic Details

### Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology

**Edited by:** George Ritzer

**eISBN:** 9781405124331

**Print publication date:** 2007

Update: 2010-04-26 [Revision History](#) ↓

## Think tanks

**Thomas Medvetz**

<b>Subject</b>	<a href="#">Cultural Studies</a> <a href="#">Sociology</a> » <a href="#">Sociology of Knowledge</a>
<b>Key-Topics</b>	<a href="#">ideology</a> , <a href="#">knowledge management</a>
<b>DOI:</b>	10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.x

A think tank is a half-century-old notion commonly invoked in political discourse to refer to civil society organizations specializing in the production and dissemination of knowledge related to public policy. In recent decades, the number and apparent political significance of think tanks have increased worldwide, making them a focus of growing scholarly and popular attention. Even so, ambiguities surrounding the proper definition of a think tank and the appropriate classification of their affiliated “policy experts” have hampered the development of a general theory of their political effects.

### Semantic History

The term “think tank” originated in the United States of the late nineteenth century as a colloquial and often vaguely condescending expression for a person's head or brain. Playful references to think tanks can be found in novels, advertisements, and newspaper articles from the 1890s to the 1960s. For instance, among the *OED*'s sample sentences is a passage from a 1964 newspaper article in which former President Harry Truman jokes about the onset of senility: “Truman ... said he hoped to live to be 90 but only ‘if the old think-tank is working.’”

A shift in the term's referent, from brain to research organization, began in the late 1950s. One organization, the Stanford University-based Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS), appears to have supplied the bridge for this shift. CASBS acquired the nickname “the Think Tank” (usually capitalized) around 1957 for its high concentration of “brainpower” and technical proficiency. (Despite this fact, CASBS is today not usually counted among think tanks.) During the 1960s, the term came to be associated with a set of post-World War II military planning groups, of which the RAND Corporation was the prototype. Taking its name from the phrase “research and development,” RAND was established as a project of the Douglas Aircraft Company in 1945 and spun off as an independent entity in 1948. The founding of RAND was part of a larger effort by the US federal government to increase its technical and warfare capabilities in the context of World War II and the Cold War. Other defense-oriented policy institutes to emerge during the same period include the Hudson Institute, the Mitre Corporation, and the Center

for Naval Analyses.

Meanwhile, Progressive-Era research organizations such as the Brookings Institution, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace were not usually classified as think tanks. In the 1960s, journalists and public officials referred to these organizations with generic descriptors such as “research institute,” “private research center,” and “non-profit research corporation.” In the 1970s and 1980s, as the number of organizations devoted to public policy research and planning grew exponentially, the term “think tank” became part of the political lexicon. A profusion of journalistic accounts announced the arrival of think tanks on the American policymaking scene (Dickson 1971). In the 1990s, the think tank concept became more codified with the publication of numerous think tank directories (e.g., Hellebust 1996; Innis & Johnson 2002).

There is no legal definition of a think tank. While most such groups in the United States operate as 501(c)(3) (“charitable, non-profit, religious, and educational”) organizations under the Internal Revenue Service code, some think tanks, including the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Century Foundation, are not 501(c)(3)s. Furthermore, most 501(c)(3)s are not think tanks. Nor does the tax category travel to other national settings, where think tanks are a growing part of political life. In sum, while the think tank category has acquired the appearance of growing precision, its boundaries remain murky and imprecise.

## Historical Development

Originally an American phenomenon, the emergence of think tanks can be traced to a combination of several factors. First, the extraordinary power of American business as a social and political force has allowed its leading figures to create their own organs of intellectual production. Most of the earliest policy institutes, such as Brookings and the Twentieth Century Fund, were founded directly by capitalists who wished to intervene in political debates. The concentration of economic capital during the industrial era also permitted the creation of a large philanthropic sector capable of supporting these organizations. A second condition for the growth of think tanks in the United States was the relative absence or weakness of alternative political institutions that might have rendered them irrelevant. The most important example was the absence of a major segment of the state devoted to the production of technocratic knowledge. The tendency of American politicians to consult outside experts, rather than promote the growth of a government technocracy, was consistent with the longstanding institutional pattern that favored non-state solutions to problems of social and economic order. The relatively minor policy-planning role played by American parties also paved the way for the growth of think tanks. A third major contributing factor was the presence of a technocratic social scientific tradition in the United States centered on a model of the social scientist as a professional rather than an intellectual. In short, the emergence of think tanks could take place only with the active cooperation of intellectual producers already predisposed to enter a space of knowledge production dominated by political and economic demand.

The Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War provided the main policy contexts for the initial growth of think tanks. The Great Depression, for example, prompted the creation of the Committee for Economic Development and the National Planning Association. However, the most dramatic increase in the number of think tanks occurred after 1970. This proliferation can be traced to several factors, including new campaign finance laws that encouraged the growth of Political Action Committees (PACs) and other advocacy organizations; the growth of the mass media, including 24-hour cable news, which increased demand for political punditry; and the reinvigoration of the American conservative movement, which actively supported the growth of think tanks as a way of fostering a “counter-intelligentsia” to compete with rival intellectual groups. Since 1970, American think tanks have generally grown more competitive, specialized in their foci, overtly ideological, and oriented to the news media (McGann 1992). Think tanks have also multiplied in other countries around the world, especially throughout the Anglo-speaking world, the post-communist countries, including the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and Asia (McGann & Weaver 2000).

## Think Tanks as an Object of Scholarly Interest

Many of the first scholarly investigations of think tanks were case studies of particular organizations (Critchlow 1985; Schriftgiesser 1960). Scholars subsequently became interested in identifying the historical conditions for the emergence of think tanks (Smith 1991), developing typologies (Weaver 1989), and identifying the kinds of policy situations in which think tanks are most likely to have identifiable effects (Rich 2004). However, despite growing empirical knowledge about think tanks, some basic cleavages persist in the literature. For example, scholars operating in the pluralist tradition tend to portray think tanks as the incubators of “bona fide intellectuals,” while

scholars working in the theoretical tradition inaugurated by C. Wright Mills depict think tanks as essentially “political mercenaries,” or lobbying firms in disguise (Domhoff 1999; Dye 1978).

Even more fundamentally, the problem of definition continues to vex scholars. In general, two approaches to this dilemma have predominated in the literature. On the one side, many scholars define think tanks by stipulating their formal independence from states, markets, and universities, as well as from government research bureaus, university-based policy institutes, and research-based advocacy groups (Stone 1996). This approach has the seeming advantage of analytical precision, yet it also has at least four major drawbacks. First, this approach privileges the experience of North American and British think tanks, which are more likely than their Asian, African, Latin American, and continental European counterparts to claim, or to be recognized for, their independence. In many settings, the label “think tank” is applied to organizations that are openly affiliated with corporations, state agencies, universities, and even churches (Stone & Denham 2004). Second, when applied consistently, the tenet of independence leaves certain agreed-upon cases out of the category (e.g., the Hoover Institution, an affiliate of Stanford University). Inconsistencies among actual counts of think tanks corroborate this point (compare, for example, the counts of Hellebust 1996, Rich 2004, and Smith 1991). Third, the tenet of independence divests the concept of *historical* content by hiding the fact that the first organizations to exist under the think tank rubric were actually the direct offspring of states, parties, business firms, and universities.

Fourth, and most important, the tenet of independence renders the scholar at least partially captive to the mission and worldview of the think tank itself, in that a think tank's first goal, even prior to that of exercising political influence, is to differentiate itself from neighboring institutions, such as lobbying and public relations firms, advocacy groups, and research universities (see Goodman 2005). To insist on the think tank's independence for definitional purposes, then, is to assist the organization in carrying out this part of its mission.

Recognizing such pitfalls, some scholars have put aside the issue of definition altogether and focused instead on the organizational ecology in which think tanks are embedded. The concepts most commonly employed for this approach are “epistemic community,” “policy-planning network,” and “advocacy coalition.” This approach frees the scholar from complicity with the think tank's mission, but it also fails to convey any sense of the think tank's specificity or distinctiveness, either as an organizational form or as a strategy of political engagement.

Medvetz (forthcoming) proposes a synthesis of the two approaches that builds the pursuit of distinction into the definition of a think tank. In this view, a think tank's central goal is to assemble a distinctive blend of academic, political, economic, and media resources and thereby mediate the encounter among these forms of power. Academic resources include credentials and other forms of scholarly recognition; political resources include access to politicians and procedural know-how; economic resources include money and entrepreneurial skill; and media resources include access to the means of publicity and journalistic style. In this understanding, a think tank's structural hybridity affords it a considerable degree of freedom and flexibility.

## Current Problems

The most pressing problems in the study of think tanks involve the challenge of integrating existing knowledge with theories in related fields. For example, think tanks bear important resemblances to, and can be examined in the same mode as, other liminal figures in the social structure, such as human rights organizations (Guilhot 2005), experts in Arab affairs (Eyal 2006), and international lawyers (Dezelay & Garth 2002). More generally, it remains to be seen whether the study of think tanks may be integrated with sociological theories of intellectuals. Other outstanding questions in the study of think tanks concern their role in macro-social processes such as the spread of neoliberalism. How are think tanks linked to the neoliberal project? Furthermore, to what degree is their proliferation around the world a direct result of organizational entrepreneurship by American actors?

SEE ALSO: [Expertise, “Scientification,” and the Authority of Science](#); [Knowledge Management](#); [Knowledge Societies](#); [Knowledge, Sociology of](#)

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

Critchlow, D. T. (1985) *The Brookings Institution, 1916–1952: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society*. Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb.

Dezelay, Y. & Garth, B., (2002) *The Internationalization of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to*

*Transform Latin American States*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Dickson, P. (1971) *Think Tanks*. Atheneum, New York.

Domhoff, G. W. (1999) *Who Rules America 2000*. Simon and Schuster, New York.

Dye, T. R. (1978) Oligarchic Tendencies in National Policy-Making: The Role of the Private Policy-Planning Organizations. *Journal of Politics* (40) (2): 309-31.

Eyal, G. (2006) *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Goodman, J. C. (2005) What is a Think Tank? National Center for Policy Analysis. Available at [www.ncpa.org/pub/special/20051220-sp.html](http://www.ncpa.org/pub/special/20051220-sp.html) (retrieved July 10, 2008).

Guilhot, N. (2005) *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order*. Columbia University Press, New York.

Hellebust, L. (ed.) (1996) *Think Tank Directory: A Guide to Nonprofit Public Policy Research Organizations*. Government Research Service, Topeka, KS.

Innis, M. & Johnson, J., (2002) *Directory of Think Tank Publications*. Methuen, London.

McGann, J. G. (1992) Academics to Ideologues: A Brief History of the Public Policy Research Industry. *PS: Political Science and Politics* (25) (4): 733-40.

McGann, J. G. & Weaver, R. K., (eds.) (2000) *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action*. Transaction Press, Somerset, NJ.

Medvetz, T. (forthcoming) *Think Tanks in America: Power, Politics, and the New Forms of Intellectual Engagement*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Peschek, J. G. (1987) *Policy-Planning Organizations: Elite Agendas and America's Rightward Turn*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.

Rich, A. (2004) *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Schriftgiesser, K. (1960) *Business Comes of Age: The Story of the Committee for Economic Development and Its Impact upon the Economic Policies of the United States, 1942-1960*. Harper & Brothers, New York.

Smith, J. A. (1991) *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite*. Free Press, New York.

Stone, D. (1996) *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*. Frank Cass, London.

Stone, D. & Denham, A., (eds.) (2004) *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Politics of Ideas*. Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Weaver, R. K. (1989) The Changing World of Think Tanks. *PS: Political Science and Politics* (September): 563-78.

## Cite this article

Medvetz, Thomas. "Think tanks." *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Ritzer, George (ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2007. [Blackwell Reference Online](http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/subscriber/toctnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2010_chunk_g978140512433126_ss1-63). 16 September 2011 <[http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/subscriber/toctnode?id=g9781405124331\\_yr2010\\_chunk\\_g978140512433126\\_ss1-63](http://www.sociologyencyclopedia.com/subscriber/toctnode?id=g9781405124331_yr2010_chunk_g978140512433126_ss1-63)>

**Copyright**

Blackwell Publishing and its licensors hold the copyright in all material held in Blackwell Reference Online. No material may be resold or published elsewhere without Blackwell Publishing's written consent, save as authorised by a licence with Blackwell Publishing or to the extent required by the applicable law.