

Four think tank perspectives

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Note to readers

This is a first draft of an article intended for a public policy journal. Comments on what journals to target and how to advance the very preliminary section 4 are especially welcome.

Abstract

The academic literature on think tanks has spent considerable effort on defining think tanks and establishing typologies. Despite these attempts think tank studies have not arrived at a common understanding of what think tanks are and how they operate. This article uses a simple general think tank definition to identify key epistemological assumptions and distinguish four ideal-typical perspectives that capture most of the empirical approaches that have been applied to think tanks. The perspectives provide an overview of this heterogeneous field of research that can be used as a basis for discussing empirical cross-fertilisation.

1. Introduction

Think tanks are being established globally as agents in public policy across different levels of governance. This is evident both in the political attention and media coverage that they receive and in the growing academic literature on think tanks. The study of think tanks has developed unsystematically with theoretical and empirical contributions expanding in different directions. While respecting the heterogeneous nature of the field, this article suggests that empirical contributions to the literature can be divided into four ideal-typical perspectives that provide an overview of some central epistemological choices in different types of think tank studies.

Drawing on Giovanni Sartori's work and existing definitions I develop a general definition of think tanks with maximum extension to provide a broadly applicable basic understanding of think tanks. The definition centres the attention on autonomy and influence as two fundamental concepts in think tank studies. These concepts can each be approached in two ways depending on what think tanks are conceived as being autonomous from and what their influence is directed at. On the basis of these two choices four ideal-typical perspectives on think tanks are generated. The perspectives are then outlined and examples of empirical contributions in the literature are situated in the different perspectives. Finally the article discusses the implications of ordering the think tanks in each perspective, to what extent they may be combined and what methodological implications this has for future studies of think tanks.

2. From think tank definitions to perspectives

Although studies of think tanks are published in a variety of academic journals there seems to be some agreement that these agents are tied in with developments in the wider field of public policy. So far many of the contributions to the think tank literature have been concerned with how to conceptualise think tanks (Dickson 1972, Weaver 1989, Smith 1991, Stone 1996, Stone, Denham and Garnet 1998, Stone 2001, McGann and Weaver 2002, Rich 2004, Stone and Denham 2004, Stone 2007, Medvetz 2008, Pautz 2011). Many of these studies have used definitions as a basis for creating think tank typologies. Suggested think tank typologies have been expanded from ‘advocacy think tanks’, ‘contract research organisations’ and ‘universities without students’ (Weaver 1989) to include a range of types including ‘party think tanks’, ‘policy clubs’ and ‘policy enterprises’ (McGann and Weaver 2000, Abelson 2002) in the US and think tanks ‘generating ideas’, performing ‘policy oriented analysis’ and ‘furthering debate’ in the context of the EU (Ullrich 2004). Although theoretical and concept forming studies are increasingly being supplemented by empirical contributions to the literature (Braml 2006, Bertelli and Wenger 2009, Xufeng 2009, Medvetz 2010, Wells 2011, Pautz 2012) the links between theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature are unsystematic. Apart from James McGann’s global surveys of think tanks (McGann et al. 2012) studies are not systematically accumulating knowledge.

The think tank literature as described above suffers from what Giovanni Sartori termed the ‘travelling problem’ (1970: 1033f) i.e. that think tank studies inherit different concepts, definitions and typologies that have already been defined and re-defined differently in the existing public policy literature. The problem in many of the attempts to define think tanks is that they do not use what Sartori call ‘universal conceptualisations’ (Sartori 1970: 1044). The bias of some definitions towards certain epistemologies is exemplified in Andrew Rich’s definition of think tanks as ‘... ‘independent, non-interest-based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policy-making process’ (Rich 2004: 11). This understanding favours understanding think tanks as suppliers of knowledge that ‘obtain support’ for their positions. Rich’s definition seems to neglect approaches to think tanks that view them as research organisations that meet the demands of political agents and do not seek to advocate particular points of view. On the other hand McGann and Weaver’s definition fails to mention the interest dimension to think tanks by defining think tanks merely as ‘non-governmental, not-for-profit research organisations with substantial organisational autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties’ (McGann and Weaver 2005: 5).

Following Sartori’s approach this section advances a definition of think tanks with maximal extension and minimal intension intended to capture the diversities of think tanks in different polities and contexts while still distinguishing the think tank as a separate concept (Sartori 1970: 1044). On the basis of this definition I go on to outline four perspectives or ‘medium level categories’ to capture different epistemological approaches to think tanks and exemplify them with empirical contributions. In the existing literature there is broad agreement on some points relating to think tanks:

- Think tanks are organisations with a physical presence and resources.
- Think tanks claim some degree of autonomy.
- Think tanks attempt to exert influence on public policy understood broadly as courses of action adopted and pursued by political decision-makers.
- Following these points we arrive at the following general definition of think tanks as:

Organisations that claim autonomy from and attempt to influence public policy.

This definition is intended to be extensive enough to allow universal application. By seeing think tanks as organisations the term is distinguished from policy networks, epistemic communities or advocacy coalitions. It is debateable however whether the definition is specific enough to distinguish think tanks from related organisations like political parties, interest groups and lobbyists. While many theories see think tanks as organisations that fall in between universities (that claim autonomy from but do not attempt to influence public policy) and political agents (that do not claim autonomy) it is disputed whether some think tanks do in fact operate as (informal) lobby-organisations or pressure groups (Plehwé 2010). A possible way of distinguishing think tanks from these types of organisations would be to include a criterion for research based publication in the definition, but this seems to compromise the universality of the definition as some perspectives see think tank activity as very elite-directed despite publications being publicly available on the internet. As we will see the views of how think tanks relate to other political agents is related to the perspectives on autonomy and influence.

For the purpose of outlining medium level conceptualisations I turn to question of the two central concepts in the definition, autonomy and influence, can be approached.

Autonomy has different aspects and is widely discussed in the literature on think tanks (Rich 2004: 11, McGann and Weaver 2005: 5). One aspect is material and relates to funding structures. If a think tank is financed overwhelmingly by one or a limited number of sources it is likely to create suspicion that the think tank is indeed a front group or cover up for these key stakeholders or a state-funded enterprise. This dimension of autonomy can be termed independency. Another aspect of autonomy is ideational and related to representation. Think tanks are non-representative organisations in the sense that they cannot formally represent certain interests. This is the key difference that demarcates think tanks from other organisations engaging in public policy like political parties and interest organisations. Whereas interest organisations use representation and the ability to mobilise their constituents as one of the key mechanisms to attain influence, think tanks refrain from doing this because working on a specific mandate compromises their credibility and room for manoeuvre. Like universities think tanks must claim intellectual independency to retain credibility. Having said this some think tanks do adhere to more or less specified world views or ideologies, but these think tanks claim analytical soundness in the analysis underlying their ideological framing of arguments.

The second part of the definition states that think tanks *attempt to influence public policy*. This part of the definition points out that think tanks utilise soft aspects of power like persuasion and argumentation to produce influence (Frølund-Thomsen). In relation to public policy influence can take diverse forms. One is to provide policy advice, a field in which consultancies have taken up a lot of space (Pautz 2011).

The attempts of think tanks to be independent, non-representative and to influence public policy do not mean that think tanks do this in similar ways. Rather think tanks may adopt different strategies to retain funding, independency and to achieve influence. We can conceive of strategies as different ways of defining a purpose and a scheme to achieve it. The strategy is also related to the funding context, and considerations of bias among stakeholders. When under financial pressure the balancing of funding, independency and influence may involve trade-offs. To avoid these trade-offs many think tanks strategically try to remain diversified in terms of funding and open in terms of strategy. Think tanks typically have a

relatively broad understanding of both purpose and scheme because a more focused strategy risks scaring off potential supporters. A broad strategy gives think tanks 'room for manoeuvre' by avoiding becoming married to certain interests.

In the following I outline four perspectives on think tanks. 'Perspectives' are here understood as epistemologies of think tanks, i.e. understandings that define how valid knowledge about think tanks can be obtained and possibly also what strategies we can use to obtain this knowledge (methodology). Fleshing out these perspectives is relevant because it shows how think tanks are examples of debates within the larger field of public policy. Also it is a way of situating ontological contestations of think tanks (like the question of whether think tanks really are lobby groups) in different perspectives rather than antagonising them. This hopefully can allow a mutual recognition of different perspectives to think tanks and considerations on how knowledge about the phenomenon can better be accumulated within perspectives and cross-fertilised between them.

3. Four think tank perspectives

This section elaborates the definition suggested in the above into four ideal-typical perspectives distinguishable by the assumptions (epistemologies) regarding influence and autonomy. Ideal-types here are taken to mean that the perspectives present some general, abstract characteristics that show a 'family resemblance' between studies, but that all of these criteria do not necessarily apply to every individual study (Weber, Wittgenstein). The idea is that empirical studies face two 'questions' regarding how to view the influence and autonomy of think tanks and the (implicit or explicit) answer to these questions can be used to categorise them in different perspectives. The two choices are outlined below:

Do think tanks attempt to influence a political or administrative policy world?

This dimension relates to the way theories conceive of the public policy agents that think tanks want to influence. A crude distinction here can be made between theories that focus on public administration and the institutions in it (polity) and the theories that focus on the political process and political parties as key agents (politics). Ideal-typically these can be seen as different spheres. The political world is short-term and focused on the next election. Conversely the administrative world has a long-term focus and is resistant to change. Also arguably the political world is focused on a communicative discourse whereas the administrative world is focused on communicative discourse (Schmidt 2011). The argument here is that the choice/perception of the policy world (ontology) determines the approach (epistemology) to influence. If you focus on think tanks that engage in the political world of parties you are confronted with think tanks operating at a speed that matches the political process. Influence here is related to understanding the timing and mechanisms in mediated politics and of producing normative views that fit that of political parties. Conversely the administrative world is slower. Validity and representativity of knowledge coming in to this world is essential. In the administrative world knowledge needs to be accountable and trustworthy. Influence is attained through representing ideas that hold cognitively.

Are think tanks supply- or demand-driven?

This causation in think tank studies determines whether think tanks are seen as dependent or independent variables in the research design. In demand-driven epistemologies structures or institutions determine what roles think tanks play vis-à-vis policy-making. Here think tanks are conceived as dependent variables

the behaviour of which is determined by incentives coming from policy agents. Conversely supply-driven explanations focus on how the interests behind think tanks: the stakeholders that fund them, the members on their boards and councils and the (often privately sponsored) interest they have in promoting certain views. Here think tanks are the independent variables that affect policy-making. Seeing think tanks as either supply- or demand-driven has implications for the way their autonomy is portrayed. Demand-driven perspectives tend to neglect think tank dependencies of stakeholders (because they are peripheral to the demand of public policy institutions) whereas supply-driven organisations tend to neglect the dependencies on public organisations (because they focus on the interests that finance think tanks). In crude terms the autonomy of think tanks is either emphasised as autonomy from the public sector (demand-driven epistemologies) or the private sector (supply-driven epistemology).¹

It should be reiterated that the two dimensions above are ideal-types. In reality the difference between interacting with politicians and administration has grey-zones and unclear boundaries. Does a minister receiving input from a think tank for example represent political or administrative worlds? Does creating a network with political, administrative, business and civil society interests constitute a political or administrative world focus? Similarly the difference between demand and supply of knowledge is crude and vary over time. When does meeting a political demand become an established practice that allows think tanks to supply knowledge to other agents? These grey-zones are exactly one of the reasons that think tank studies should be distinguished into perspectives that can answer them empirically from different approaches. Below the two ideal-typical dimensions are combined to produce four perspectives on think tanks. The article does not claim that the studies in each perspective are necessarily pushing the same points. It is possible to arrive at very different empirical conclusions within each approach depending on the specific focus of the study.

The 'political adviser' perspective conceives of think tanks as agents that meet the demand for knowledge input of principles in the political world. This means that the think tank in this perspective take on the role as strategic political advisors that try to influence policy-making by developing new concepts and ideas that make political agents successful. This gives think tanks a strong normative dimension as producers of 'biased information' (Bertelli and Wenger 2009: 227). Examples of research in this category include a rational choice study of how think tanks meet the demands of Democratic and Republican representatives in the US Congress (Bertelli and Wenger 2009). Another example is Gaffney's comparison of British think tanks that informed the right-wing British government and the ministerial cabinets that informed the French left-wing government in the 1980s (Gaffney 1991). Also Denham and Garnett's studies of British think tanks under Thatcher and Blair (Denham and Garnett 1999, 2006), Bentham's study of think tanks informing New Labour (Bentham 2006) and Pautz' studies of the role of think tanks in reforming SPD and New Labour (Pautz 2010) and New Labour (Pautz 2011).

The 'administrative institutional' perspective on think tanks shares the demand-driven focus of the political advisor perspective. This group of studies sees established administrative institutions as the key determinant of think tank behaviour. Think tanks in this perspective must be conscious of the demands among different administrative actors involved in policy-making. Unlike the advisory perspective 'biased

¹ Interestingly it seems that autonomy or independency when used in general has different normative bindings. In the US context autonomy from public interests are credited whereas European studies tend to focus more on autonomy from private interests.

information' is not considered a resource as think tanks in this perspective as influence here depends on knowing the demands of administrative agents. Rather the demand for knowledge that think tanks meet it considered 'cognitive' meaning that think tanks must produce credible knowledge that is considered to be as un-biased and as generalisable as possible in order to feed into the policy-process. This perspective encompasses the many historical and sociological accounts of the institutionalisation of policy advice in different national case studies, comparative studies and different levels of government (Thunert 2000, Thunert 2004, Thunert 2006, Abelson 2004, Abelson 2006, McGann 2010, Jochem and Vatter 2006, Braml 2006, Xufeng 2009, Wells 2011, Stone and Denham 2004). These contributions can help explain national variations in the number, size and influence of think tanks.

The 'instrumental' perspective on think tanks share the notion of think tanks as deliverers of 'biased information' that we find in the political advisor perspective. This family of studies see think tanks as vehicles of their stakeholders or financiers. Many studies within this perspective have a critical take on think tanks and call into question their legitimacy and accountability. Some see think tanks as a representation of hegemonic agents that are at odds with democratic governance (Plehwe 2008, Plehwe 2010). Think tanks conceptions building on elite theory have argued that think tanks due to their dependence on corporate or private money and informal ties with decision-makers circumvent parliamentary politics and maintain existing power asymmetries in society (Pautz 2011: 424). Other studies of political knowledge production suggest that Gramscian concepts like hegemony, discourse, civil society are key to understanding the way think tanks function in contemporary societies (Pautz 2011: 425). One of the main ideas in this approach is that think tanks, to use Louis Althusser's term, work as 'ideological apparatuses' that along with other civil society organisations maintain non-coercive power relations by producing legitimising discourses that construct policy interaction and communication on the basis of policy ideals (Pautz 2011: 425). Studies in this perspective also emphasise that think tanks can work trans-nationally and engage in global coalitions often within a neo-liberal framework.

Finally the 'network' perspective on think tanks encompasses a group of studies that see think tanks as suppliers of knowledge to administrative agents in the policy process. The assumptions underlying this perspective is that think tank engage in complex governance structures, but that think tanks are relatively unconstrained by the policy process. This means that think tanks can act through networks that supply information to administrative governance structures. This perspective is compatible with perspectives on epistemic communities (Adler and Haas 1992, Haas 1992), advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), discourse coalitions (Hajer 1993) and network theory. It also engages think tanks in larger theoretical literatures related to expertise in public opinion (Fischer 1990, Fischer 2003). Although think tanks in this perspective supply knowledge and are tied in with the perspectives of their stakeholders, they do not deliver biased knowledge. Rather they seek to aggregate and present knowledge that is likely to be demanded and may contribute to existing governance programmes and further more general interests of their stakeholders. Studies in thus vain include perspectives on how think tanks influence form knowledge networks and promote knowledge transfer at the global level (Stone 2001, McGann and Sabatini 2011). It also involves considerations of the expert roles that think tanks can mix to produce influence (Medvetz 2010) and a perspective on think tanks as policy-shapers (BEPA 2012).

Below the four perspectives on think tanks are summarised:

Table 1: Four ideal-typical think tank perspectives.

	Political policy world	Administrative policy world
Demand-driven	<i>Political advisor:</i> Think tanks meet demand for biased knowledge.	<i>Administrative institutional:</i> Think tanks meet demand for cognitive knowledge.
Supply-driven	<i>Instrumental:</i> Think tank supply normative knowledge on the basis of stakeholder interests.	<i>Network:</i> Think tanks supply cognitive knowledge to public administration.

4. Applying perspectives to think tank strategies [to be elaborated]

When approaching think tanks we should be aware of the possibilities they have of changing the strategies they are using to influence public policy. Because of their informal character think tanks have the flexibility to change ideals and practices that go beyond that of formal institutions that are subject to stronger legal and ethical regulation. For the purpose of advancing empirical research, a key challenge for this section is to discover under what circumstances the perspectives outlined in the above can be meaningfully combined. To this end I use the notion of think tank strategies understood as ‘a sense of the desired impacts of the think tank and the ways in which the intellectual work is supposed to impact upon the outside world, on the present and on the future...’ (Osborne 2004: 437) as a basis for approaching think tanks empirically. I suggest the following general approach to case analysis of think tanks:

- What impacts on public policy does the think tank aim at achieving?
- What practices does the think tank adopt to attain its goals?

An analysis engaging both with the desired impact of think tanks (as evident in mission statements) and the practices that are employed to achieve them (publications, events and other activities) can help understand how think tanks conceive of the opportunities for attaining influence and the costs in terms of a lack of autonomy that this may have for them and whether think tanks engage continuously with one strategy or change it over time. Thus as shown below, it can be relevant to use several perspectives on think tanks in a single study.

Empirical examples [to be elaborated]

- Some, mostly anecdotal, studies suggest that think tanks when influential succeed in transcending the perspectives outlined in the above. Think tanks may ‘break out’ of a certain perspective and transcend the borders between supply- or demand and political and administrative worlds (Adam Smith Institute/Institute of Economic Affairs/Centre for Policy Studies under Thatcher, Demos/IPPR under Blair).

It is evident that the particular set of circumstances that determine influence on public policy is beyond the control of think tanks and that their influence is by no means only a result of their own doing. Also

explanations of think tank behaviour may include mundane motives like that of securing positions for people that are temporarily or permanently unwilling or –able to pursue careers in other organisations like political parties, media organisations or public administrations. Despite these reservations the approach outlined in this section suggests a way to approach think tank strategies empirically in a way that combines insights from different perspectives.

5. Conclusions *[To be elaborated]*

- A universal definition and ordering of think tanks studies in four perspectives depending on how they conceive of autonomy and influence.
- An empirical research design focused on think tanks strategies (goals and practices).

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