

## Book Review: Think Tanks In America

by Blog Admin

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Over the past half-century, think tanks have become fixtures of American politics, supplying advice to presidents and policymakers, expert testimony on Capitol Hill, and convenient facts and figures to journalists and media specialists. But what are think tanks? Who funds them? And just how influential have they become? In **Think Tanks in America**, **Thomas Medvetz** argues that the unsettling ambiguity of the think tank is less an accidental feature of its existence than the very key to its impact. **Mark Carrigan** finds that the book is an important contribution to the academic literature on both think tanks and intellectuals.

**Think Tanks In America. Thomas Medvetz. University of Chicago Press. October 2012.**

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Given the ubiquity of think tanks within contemporary politics, it is easy to forget that their current influence is a relatively recent phenomenon. Yet without an understanding of their history, it is difficult to understand either their role within public life or its broader significance. *Think Tanks In America* is a sophisticated and impressive work of historical sociology which charts their emergence over half a century, offering a distinctive and compelling explanation of how such organizations came to exist and to enjoy the influence which they now do.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the theoretical sophistication of what is first and foremost an empirical study. This is particularly apparent in the first chapter, within which [Thomas Medvetz](#) sets out to 'rethink the think tank'. He takes issue with a prevailing tendency within the think tanks literature to treat its object of study (i.e. the 'think tank' itself) as unproblematic. Instead he asks, drawing on Bourdeusian theory, how the category itself emerged. Or in other words: how did the notion of a 'think tank' become meaningful and commonplace? He contrasts this to the prevailing 'substantialist' approach which treats the think tank as a particular sort of entity or thing.

This might seem counter intuitive to those unfamiliar with the theoretical approach adopted by the author but its value stems from the fact that "there are no substantive properties shared by all members of the think tank category as the term is currently used in political discourse". Given the heterogeneity encountered when investigating 'think tanks', there is an inevitable tendency for social scientists who understand their investigation in substantialist terms to get lost in the production of taxonomies. Not only is this analytically unproductive but, crucially, it also often acts to foreclose inquiry into the "social relations (of hierarchy, struggle partnership, and so on) that surround and make possible the think tank". To put this in slightly plainer terms: the approach Medvetz adopts looks at the broader context within which think tanks have come to exist over time, rather than simply focusing on the question of *what* a think tank *is* and how variation amongst them should be categorised.

The book doesn't disappoint in this respect, offering an empirically detailed but also conceptually rich account of the history of think tanks. Medvetz argues that this hinges on the emergence of a 'space of think tanks': a distinct subspace of knowledge production which has arisen over time at the point of intersection between the academic, political, economic and media fields. The process he documents involve a differentiation between the think tanks and their surrounding fields but also within the space of think tanks itself. For as those organisations differentiated themselves from universities, lobby groups and



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media outlets, they also increasingly orientated themselves towards each other, coming to constitute “a semi distinct social universe with its own logic, history, and interior structures, not to mention its own agents”. His argument to this end is rich and detailed but the point is fundamentally a simple one. What we now call a ‘think tank’ came into being through the efforts of such organisations to practically define how they were different from universities, lobbying organisations and media outlets.

However what is perhaps the most compelling aspect of his account comes at the end of the book. It is also the point at which the personal concerns underlying the author’s research interests become most apparent. Drawing together the diverse strands of the book, he argue that the success think tanks have enjoyed has also helped undermine the relevance of autonomously produced social scientific knowledge. The public figures of the think tanks, with their capacity to deftly negotiate the twin worlds of media and lobbying, have blurred the boundaries between intellectuals and non-intellectuals in America and relegated many within the academy to the margins of public debate. This influx of new competitors has left social scientists in a situation where, increasingly, money and political power direct ideas, rather than ideas directing themselves.

In essence Medvetez is arguing that autonomous social scientists have been squeezed out of the intellectual ‘market place’. Which raises the obvious question: how should they respond? His nuanced and careful book wisely avoids the temptation of attempting an answer but it does go some way to elucidating the often unappreciated complexity of the question. This book is an important contribution to the academic literature on both think tanks and intellectuals. But it is also one which will be of profound interest to a broader readership concerned with the role of ideas in political life.

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