Book Review: How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies, edited by James McGann, Jillian Rafferty, and Anna Viden

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Across the globe, there are more than four thousand policy institutes or think tanks that research or advocate for economic and social development. Yet the relationship between these organizations and the policies they influence is not well understood. How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies examines case studies drawn from a range of political and economic systems worldwide to provide a detailed understanding of how think tanks can have an impact on a variety of policy issues. Marcos Gonzalez Hernando finds that this volume's key contributions lie in its comprehensive literature review and its wealth of experiences and organisational models.



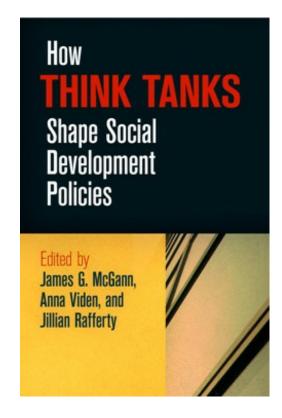
How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies, edited by James McGann, Jillian Rafferty, and Anna Viden. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014.

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Over the past decades, the roles and relevance of think tanks, covering ever more countries and policy areas, have become both greater and more difficult to define. Their institutional model – once most noticeable in the English-speaking world – is today present and politically significant not only in Washington, but also in settings as distant as Brussels, Beijing, Buenos Aires, Warsaw, Jakarta and Nairobi. With this expansion, the contours of what defines think tanks have become murkier and their concrete function ever more diverse.

In this juncture, the publication of *How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies*, edited by James McGann, Jillian Rafferty, and Anna Viden, seeks to bring some clarity to the part these organisations play in shaping social development policies across institutional contexts. For full disclosure, McGann is a world-renowned expert on think tanks and the director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, which produces the most authoritative global

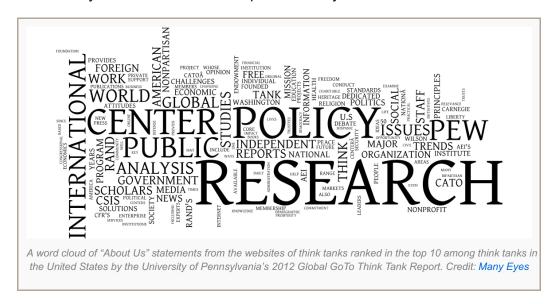


ranking of these institutions. Hence, this book is informed by a more ambitious comparative effort, global in scope.

The introduction to this edited volume begins by recounting the origins of social development initiatives beyond a narrow focus on GDP growth, starting in earnest in the 1960s. It continues by exploring the relevance of think tanks in this process, tackling exhaustively the vast literature on these organisations and the lengthy debate over their precise definition. This, foreseeably, begets an examination of the thorny issue of their institutional and intellectual independence. After this, and notwithstanding the many difficulties involved, the editors insist that think tanks serve the crucial purpose of bridging research and policy. This is since they can offer the expertise and long term perspective that few policymakers can afford, while providing political appositeness and accessibility rarely found in academia.

From this foundation, each subsequent chapter – written by researchers and practitioners –outlines the structure

and output of several of these institutions, spanning numerous countries and divided in the subsections of education, infrastructure, sustainability, economic reform, agriculture, poverty alleviation and social development. These contributions expand on the history, impact, lessons and challenges of each organisation in its respective milieu, being thus immensely valuable for further comparative analysis.



At an aggregate level, two main theses underpin this enterprise. First, that think tanks, precisely because they aim to inform public policy, are extremely sensitive to the economic and political contexts in which they operate. Thus, they are an excellent indicator of the social development and democratic robustness of their host countries. It follows that, as the institutional tradition and political situation of places like China, France, Ethiopia or Indonesia vary tremendously, so does the organisational structure, research output and outreach strategy of their think tanks.

The second contention is more daring. McGann *et al* argue that the very presence of think tanks can, in its own right, become a powerful force for social development and the strengthening of civil society. This relates to the central proposition of an earlier book, which advanced a similar argument vis-à-vis the influence of these organisations in the process of democratisation and free-market reform in transitional countries. The logic behind this reasoning is that the main outcome of think tanks is to bring *ideas* into the policymaking process. This, even when taking partisanship into account, can foster a more informed public debate and the effectiveness of policies, which in turn creates a space for independent analysis, which can catalyse reform.

The underlying paragon of this model – which stresses independence from the state and sectorial interests – is the best version of the USA's think tank universe, with its remarkable diversity and philanthropic tradition. And although the concrete version of this standard falls short of the editors' ambitions – particularly concerning its current political polarisation – there is an implicit teleology behind this reflection. Since, if we follow this argument to its end, polities across the world, aided by think tanks and regardless of their variability, will tend towards a future that brings together in one movement social development, free-market reform and democracy. This explains, in this reviewer's opinion, the least robust passages of the opening chapter: a set of brief summaries of the political and economic situation of vast areas of the world (e.g. Latin America, Eastern Europe, Middle East), describing how these places fail to nurture an environment for think tanks approaching an ideal version of the *Anglo-American domain*.

This is linked to a faint understatement of the political facet of think tanks, pervasive throughout the book. This might be due, in part, to the importance assigned to independence to define 'true' think tanks, but also to an outlook that focuses more on institutional structures, histories and successes than on the concrete political debates behind their work. This is understandable, given the tome's aims of comparing experiences and practices, but risks conveying a world in which every think tank pushes toward the same direction, as if 'development' and 'democracy' were somewhat independent of their concrete content. This is especially conspicuous in the subsection on economic reform, where the political dimension of expertise provision is most visible.

The above concerns aside, this volume's key contributions lie in its comprehensive literature review and its wealth of experiences and organisational models. Hence, it is of interest to think tank researchers and practitioners, to scholars of international development and political sociology, as well as to anyone studying strategies for influencing public policy across political contexts.

It is worth adding that the book, mostly obliquely, hints towards a fascinating hypothesis for future research, regarding the effects of think tanks on their environment. That is, if these organisations, regardless of their institutional diversity, effectively help produce political contexts that look increasingly like the United States' concrete – rather than ideal – policy debate, with all its lights and shadows. If that is a desirable or irreversible tendency is another matter.

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Cambridge, with a background in Social Anthropology, holding an MSc from the London School of Economics and a MA from Goldsmiths. He is interested in the sociology of time, knowledge and intellectuals, and particularly in forms of engagement between academia and social media, being himself an editor for a successful Latin American blog on current affairs, society and literature, ballotage.cl. His doctoral research, supervised by Dr. Patrick Baert, focuses on the institutional and intellectual transformation of British think-tanks in the face of the economic crisis of 2008. Read more reviews by Marcos.

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