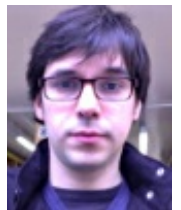


Book Review: How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies, edited by James McGann, Jillian Rafferty, and Anna Viden

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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.

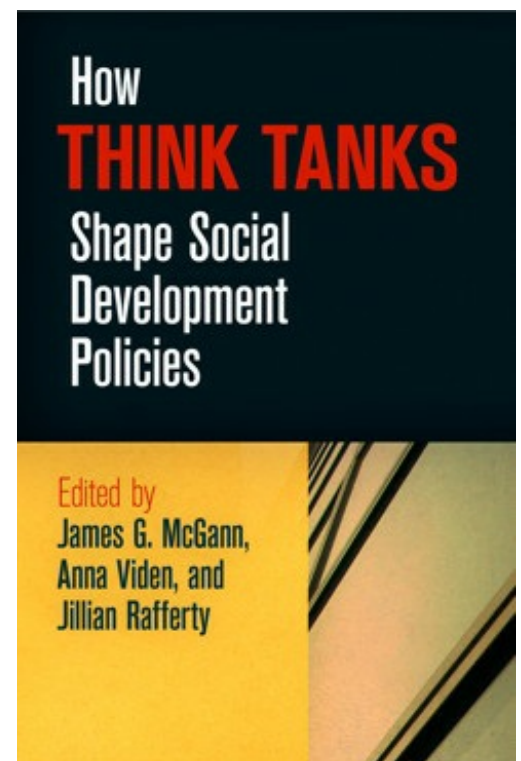
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Over the past decades, the roles and relevance of think tanks, covering ever more countries and policy areas, have become both greater and more difficult to define. Their institutional model – once most noticeable in the English-speaking world – is 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



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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