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Between Think Tanks and Academia?

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Why me?

- Phd on think tanks, and publications since
- On the board of a large think tank
- Member of think tanks
- Consultant to IOs about think tanks
- Set up an international think tank network
- Board of a charity that funds T.T.s.
- ... but don't want to work in one

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Definition and Metaphor

- **Think tanks** – organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies” (UNDP, 2003: 6)
- The ‘bridge’ metaphor entrenched in the policy lexicon as a way of perceiving the role of think tanks
- Implicit in Zsolt’s title for this seminar

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A problematic metaphor

- Presupposes clear boundaries between (social) science and policy
- Dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other
- Invites a perception of think tanks as intermediary between the world of science and the separate world of politics and policy-making.
- The ‘ivory tower’ and the so-called ‘real world’ of politics between which the think tank mediates and communicates

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Knowledge/Power Nexus

- How are the boundaries conceptualised?
- Summarised here as three myths:
 - Think Tanks are Bridges
 - Think Tanks Serve the Public Interest
 - Think Tanks Think

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Myth 1: Think Tanks Are Bridges

- Think tanks act as bridges between state, society & science
- Anglo-American literature assumption of think tanks as
 - non-profit,
 - non-governmental,
 - politically neutral institutions
 - for rational analysis of public policy
- Third sector organisations
- Civil society status as interlocutors

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International diversity

- World-wide boom of think tanks
- Hybrid types (eg: ‘virtual’ and ‘vanity’ think tank)
- Appellation is ‘elastic’ applied to a wider range of bodies than the classic American think tank model
 - research bureaux inside state structure
 - international organisations (eg: OECD)
 - affiliated to corporations
- Undermines the ‘bridge’ metaphor and ‘intermediary’ status

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Competition & Convergence

- Think tanks face competitive pressures from other sources of ‘independent’ policy research
 - interest groups: TI, Amnesty, Human Rights Watch
 - professional associations and business associations - TABD
 - universities – pressures to become more ‘useful’ to society and industry
- Networks and partnerships
- Convergence in function in function and activities, means that think tanks are losing some of their distinctiveness
 - competing for staff,
 - funding,
 - media attention

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Myth 2: Think Tanks Serve the Public

- Mission statements and home pages of think tanks often express a public service orientation:
- *Federal Trust*: “enlightening the debate on good governance”
- *Egyptian Center for Economic Studies*: its research is carried out “in the spirit of public interest”
- *IPS* “is committed to providing a forum for substantive dialogue between representatives of different branches of the government, the civil sector and the Georgian public”

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Informing the Public?

- Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is to ‘inspire and inform policy and practice...’
- Brookings: “to improve the performance of American institutions and the quality of public policy”
- IEEP “audiences range from international and European institutions to local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry and others who contribute to the policy debate”.
- T.T. address decision-making elites
- Rhetoric or reality of deliberative policy?

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Understanding for Whom?

- The ‘public realm’ is an ‘audience’ to which policy analysis is transmitted downwards
- reality a one-way, top-down process, mediated by the media
- few mechanisms for feed back from society
- public is at the bottom of the hierarchy
- The ‘policy community’ is more exclusive
- University audiences

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Serving Private Interests

- Think tank ‘empire building’
 - winning grants and chasing contracts
 - an end in itself
 - organisational survival
 - protection of jobs
- Competitive pressures in third sector can be at variance with public mission
- Career development
 - political recruitment: ‘hollowing out’ and ‘poaching’
 - retirement post
 - candidate and vanity tanks

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Myth Three: Think Tanks Think

- Think tanks do undertake research and engage in ‘thinking work’
- Thinking work of research and analysis is one function amongst others
 - ethics training,
 - in-service courses,
 - producing TV documentaries,
 - capacity building
- ‘think-and-do tanks’.

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Modes of Policy Research

- Different kinds of thinking, analysis, evaluation, informing policy endeavours.
- i.) Recycling, editing and synthesis;
- ii.) The policy entrepreneurship of ‘garbage cans’

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(i) Recycling Bins

- Re-interpreting scholarly work into accessible format
 - translation
 - sound bites
- Re-cycling of ideas
- Repetition of policy messages
- Think tanks editing or re-shaping knowledge in uni-directional movements
 - from basic to applied science,
 - from problem to solution,
 - from abstract theorists to ‘enlightened’ policy makers

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Editorial power

- “... to understand the effect of free information on power, one must first understand the paradox of plenty. A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. Attention becomes a scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, interpreters and cue-givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power. ... Brand names and the ability to bestow an international seal of approval will become more important”
- (Keohane & Nye, 1998: 89).
- Think tanks have a ‘brand name’ for dealing with conflicting evidence and information overload

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(ii) Garbage Cans

- A metaphor that gets away from the idea of think tanks as a simple bridge
- Instead of ‘rational’ or ‘expert’ inputs of analysis into policy deliberation
- garbage can approach is a more complex and chaotic notion of policy making emphasizing unpredictability
- “solutions chase problems” (March & Olsen)

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Why the ‘bridge’ metaphor works

- The bridge metaphor is simple
- Powerful narrative of think tanks “bridging” divides:
 - scholarly/political;
 - the national/global;
 - the state/society
- The concept can be operationalised into;
 - grant programs
 - capacity building initiatives
 - policy relevance of (social) science

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Why 'garbage cans' don't work

- 'Garbage cans' are too 'messy'
- concept of knowledge-policy 'nexus' is too complicated
- cannot be instrumentalized into a policy tool
- a 'politicised' notion of 'science'/policy research

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Think tankers

- Fund raising
- Demonstrating influence
- Major investment in research communication (not dissemination)
- Credibility management
- HR issues
- Dealing with the Board