

1 European think tanks : limited knowledge, important stakes

The study of think tanks is a relatively recent discipline, in particular within the European Union. We draw a parallel here between the academic study of think tanks and their emergence at a European level (1.1). We then place the study in a historical context (1.2). Finally, we highlight the stakes which are behind a better understanding of think tanks' contribution to community decision-making processes (1.3).

1.1 THE STUDY OF THINK TANKS IS RECENT, ESPECIALLY IN EUROPE

The specific study of independent policy research institutes as political actors is very recent. Whereas the first book in the United States dedicated specifically to think tanks was published 33 years ago (Dickson, 1971, cited by Stone, 1996), a quick look at our bibliography (Annex 3) – as well as references of other studies – shows that nearly everything that has been published on think tanks is less than eight years of age, apart from isolated studies of individual research institutes written in the 1980s.⁴ A significant proportion of the existing literature is North American, then British, and focuses therefore on these two geographical areas, although a few recent publications have made up for this exclusive Anglo-American bias (Stone, Denham Garnett, 1998; McGann, Weaver, 2000). In any case, if several academics have investigated think tanks within the European Union (in particular Sherrington, 2000), and if others have conducted multi-country studies, nobody has yet examined specifically think tanks that specialise in European matters within the enlarged European Union.

"The lack of attention to think tanks illuminates the biases of social scientists as much as it reflects the late development and characteristics of these organisations"

Does this reflect the limited influence of think tanks in European politics or a lack of academic interest? Stone

(2000a) explains that "the lack of attention to think tanks illuminates the biases of social scientists as much as it reflects the late development and characteristics of these organisations" as think tanks became more visible in the US and Western Europe only after the mid-1970s, when they became increasingly advocacy and media-oriented. As "these organisations were extremely few in number", she adds that specialists had "little cause to address these organisations." In the case of Europe, indeed "most of the exclusively EU-oriented think tanks only emerged in the 1980s." (Sherrington, 2000) She also contends that the difficulty to define and classify think tanks has deterred scholars from accounting for the role of think tanks in politics. However, this argument "is a misconception," replies Stone (1996), who reminds us: "Think tanks have been around for most of this century." Indeed, several organisations within our sample, such as the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Federal Trust in the U.K. were established 85 and 60 years ago respectively. Stone argues that "what the recent spate of books indicates is that think tanks have been rediscovered and deemed important" and that "the myth that think tanks are objective and

non-partisan research institutes once lulled many scholars into overlooking their participation in the political sphere."

By contrast, research on the role played by interest groups in the formulation of policies at the E.U. level is comparatively extensive and diverse (Greenwood 1997; 2003).⁵ Similarly, there has been relatively little research on E.U. think tanks and the role they play in the construction of the E.U. compared to the United States. Sherrington (2000), in one of her several reports on think tanks in the EU, in fact argues that "the extent of think tank activity at the European Union level has largely been ignored." This survey, although exploratory in nature, seeks to contribute to a growing literature on think tanks in line with recent research⁶ :

- It provides data on recent organisations as well as countries not considered so far. The approach is comparative, although a rigorous and fully comparative analysis would require a more systematic look at the political and institutional contexts within which think tanks operate in each Member State and at the E.U. level.⁷ The report is therefore also fairly descriptive in nature, as is most of the existing literature on think tanks in Europe.
- Borrowing from the epistemic model, this report also tries to present think tanks in the wider policy community of European affairs by providing some insights into think tanks' relations with other European power elites and how they try to influence public policy at different stages of the policy cycle.
- This study also finds its place in the series of recent publications which have investigated the increasingly transnational nature of think tanks' operations. Whereas most of the original production focused on think tanks within their national environment, several recent papers have indeed examined the internationalisation efforts of think tanks (Stone, 2000a/b; Sherrington, 2000).⁸

1.2 THINK TANKS, AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The history of European integration is above all a history of ideas. From the original hopes for post-war European unity shown by resistance fighters in World War II, to Jean Monnet's idea for a European Coal and Steel Community, which laid the foundations for the EEC, through to Economic and Monetary Union in the 1990s, the process of integration has always been driven forward by ideas. Such ideas have been important because often they introduced unique experiments, untested elsewhere in the world. The role of think tanks in this picture is clear. As promoters of new policy ideas, they have the potential to stimulate debate amongst European leaders, and publics, about the future shape which the European Union could take.

EXPLAINING POST-WAR THINK TANK GROWTH IN EUROPE

There was a considerable growth in the number of European think tanks in the 20th century. McGann and Weaver estimated the number in today's 25 E.U. Member States in 1998 to stand at approximately 670. The majority of these were created in the period after World War II. Since the regime changes in Eastern Europe after 1989 there has been a rapid growth in think

tank numbers there too. What explains this high level of growth? Of course, a major factor was the emergence of stable democratic governments in Western Europe in the post-war period. Think tanks require democracy to function because they need to express their views freely. Thus, the collapse of the totalitarian regimes in Germany, Austria and Italy from 1943 to 1945, the end of dictatorship in Spain, Portugal and Greece in the 1970s, and the political changes in Eastern Europe after 1989 allowed think tanks to prosper.

A second important factor is the ever-greater complexity of government in the post-war era. As the size and functions of the state grew, there was an increasing need for specialist policy knowledge, which could not always be supplied by traditional civil servants. Think tanks have partly filled this gap by acting as a source of policy advice to governments. The process of 'contracting out' of many state functions during the 1980s and 1990s, for example the privatisation of government agencies, also further increased governments' dependency on private and other non-state actors, such as consultants, auditors, think tanks, and other advisors, for independent evaluation of policy performance.

A third factor is the increased openness of government in recent decades. More attempts are now made to engage with civil society groups, for example through consultation exercises at the policy planning stage. This has increased the chance for think tanks to influence government thinking. Such a trend has been visible in the Member States and in Brussels, where the European Commission has pursued an active policy of including civil society and other groups, such as NGOs and think tanks, in decision-making.

THINK TANKS' EUROPEAN 'TRANSNATIONALISATION'

The think tanks which were created in the early part of the 20th century were essentially national research institutes.⁹ Their names denoted in many ways an international outlook—for example, the Royal Institute for International Affairs in Britain (1920) or the Kiel Institute for World Economics in Germany (1914)—but their main locus of activity was the nation-state and its place in the world alongside other nation-states. This situation probably pertained for think tanks until the 1970s. Although there were a small number of 'regional' think tanks created in the years immediately after the war which sought to both examine and promote moves toward European integration—e.g. Federal Trust (1945), Institut für europäische Politik (1959), Istituto Affari Internazionali (1965)—very few organisations had developed links which went beyond their national borders.

In order to explain why European think tanks' primary research focus and main audiences became increasingly 'transnationalised' from the 1970s onwards, we need to examine two questions: the growing importance of international policy-making fora and the growth in E.U. power and competences.

First, public policy is increasingly being determined by governments acting together within international fora, such as the WTO, the UN, the G8, or indeed the E.U. This is one element of the process of globalisation. Because think tanks generally seek to influence centres of decision-making power, as these fora grew in status, it was logical that think tank activities should have migrated there. Many think tanks now also target international, in addition to

national, decision-makers: i.e. diplomats, national politicians and policy experts working at this level, and civil servants in supranational or intergovernmental organisations.¹⁰ The shift in focus made by think tanks to this level is of course merely one example of the recent, more general expansion of the international non-profit sector on the international scene, a process which has led to a similarly rapid growth in NGOs and other lobbying groups operating here. There are also wider structural factors which have facilitated this process of transnationalisation. For example, the reduction in journey times and improved transport links means that people can easily cross borders to attend meetings, seminars and conferences. The development of information technology has had a major impact too, for example by enabling research and project collaboration to take place via e-mail.

This process of the transnationalisation of think tank work has been more pronounced in Europe than elsewhere because of the development of the European Union. This has created an environment of multi-level governance where decisions are increasingly taken between—rather than just by—governments within the E.U. institutions and where there are multiple opportunities for think tanks seeking to influence decision-makers. This process is best understood by reference to the impact which external political and economic events have always had on think tank development in the 20th century—whether at the national or global level. For example, think tanks studying international affairs first emerged in the 1920s at a time when Europe's governments were concerned about the stability of the international order. Think tanks studying global disarmament, peace and strategic questions emerged during the Cold War. In the UK, free market, 'advocacy' think tanks, such as the Institute of Economic Affairs (1955) and Centre for Policy Studies (1974), grew in importance only when Britain's governing elite lost faith in Keynesianism in the 1970s.¹¹ Therefore, likewise for the Euro-specific think tanks, these grew in number only from the mid-1980s onwards as the power of the European Community grew (and the second category think tanks also began at this stage to focus much more on European issues). It should come as no surprise that think tanks studying European and E.U. questions grew in numbers as the European Union's powers and competences expanded from the mid-1980s onwards.

There are, however, other factors which explain transnationalisation within the E.U. context. One is the question of funding. The availability of European funding for think tanks which engage in research partnerships with think tanks and other organisations across the Union has driven forward greater collaboration in this sector. (This was reported by think tank directors and will be explored in Section 4). Another factor is the increased demand by actors in the domestic political scene, especially governments, for European or internationally oriented research. This is also pushing them to collaborate more, as it is necessary to have input from researchers in other countries for a balanced result. A third reason is competition. Think tanks can enhance their status within the domestic political scene by engaging with international policy elites. It wins them respect from government and increases the perception that they are influential.

THE BRUSSELS DECISION-MAKING SCENE : AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THINK TANKS

CEPS, which was founded in 1983, is one of the earliest examples in Brussels of a think tank orienting itself exclusively towards E.U. decision-makers, although there are also examples at the national level (e.g. IEEP, 1980). The growth in this new type of think tank continued steadily throughout the 1980s. However, as section 2.1.2 will show, the largest growth in think tanks working on E.U. issues came in the 1990s, during a period of major institutional and political reform, and economic and monetary integration. As Sherrington (2000) explains, the nature of decision-making in Brussels makes it easier for think tanks to operate at a E.U. level. Because E.U. power structures are diffuse (European Commission, Council of Ministers, European Parliament), multiple 'entry points' exist for think tanks and interest groups wishing to exert influence on decision-makers. Also, it is part of the Commission's strategy to make the process of policy consultation as open and participatory as possible. This 'neo-pluralist' approach of actively encouraging interest group participation in policy-making has given think tanks both greater access to policy-makers, and has legitimised their presence in the Brussels arena.

EXAMINING THE PAST INFLUENCE OF THINK TANKS AND OTHER POLICY EXPERTS ON E.U. POLICY

Think tanks have certainly had an impact on E.U. policy-making in the past, alongside other groups of policy experts who have lobbied for change, although the extent of this impact is difficult to measure. Sherrington (2000), in her analysis of E.U. think tanks, identifies important cases where such organisations have helped shape future E.U. policy. For example, the Kangaroo Group, a once influential lobby group 'set up to promote the four founding principles of the EU, free movement of goods, services, persons and capital,' helped build up momentum for the re-launch of the EC in the 1980s, providing impetus for the 1985 White Paper on Completion of the Internal Market. Elements of CEPS' 1988 study on Economic and Monetary Union were included in the Delors Report published the next year. The Forward Studies Unit – the Commission's own internal 'think tank' now known as the Group of Policy Advisers – had a major input into the 1993 White Paper on Industrial Policy. The Belgian Presidency also used its report on Europe 2000 as the basis for the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, published in 1993.

Of course, out of the three cases listed here, only CEPS is an independent think tank of the type we will include in our survey. However, the examples do indicate how leading think tanks, or groups of experts working closely with the Commission, can influence the direction of E.U. policy.

1.3 THINK TANKS' ROLE IN E.U. DECISION-MAKING AND CONSTRUCTION PROCESSES IS POTENTIALLY IMPORTANT

Beyond the contribution of specific individuals and interest groups to the construction of a unified Europe, the specific role of think tanks deserves, we believe, closer examination as think tanks have a potentially important role to play in helping the formulation of public policies, in promoting healthy political and democratic practices within Europe, and in contributing to Europe's intellectual and cultural diplomatic efforts. As the title of the report

suggests, one of its objectives is indeed to understand whether, and to what extent, Euro-think tanks live up to what can be expected of them.

THINK TANKS' IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IS UNCERTAIN

Before going into the three types of roles just outlined, it is important to stress that it is not possible to determine with any degree of certainty what impact think tanks have on decision-making processes. This is the conclusion which several authors have reached, in contradiction with think tanks which often include particular cases of supposed influence on the political agenda and policy alternatives in their annual reports.¹²

In fact, Abelson (2002) argues in *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, that it is "onerous" and "notoriously difficult" to determine "the extent to which think tanks have influenced public opinion and public policy." Furthermore, answering the question "do think tanks matter?" is even more difficult because of the institutional differences from one country to another and the diversity of think tanks and strategies used. Abelson cites two major methodological barriers that prevent us from determining how influential think tanks may be, the difficulty to measure policy influence and to trace the origin of an idea to a particular individual or organisation. He concludes, "It may be more appropriate to discuss the relevance of think tanks in the policy-making process than to speculate about how much policy influence they wield."

One can add to this note of caution that, even if academics and think tanks provide on occasion specific instances of influential activities, cases of misleading analysis or erroneous recommendations are seldom mentioned, except when they are particularly blatant, as was the case when several Western think tanks recently tried to demonstrate the urgency of a military attack against Iraq.¹³

THE DIFFICULTY TO MEASURE THEIR IMPACT DOES NOT CONTRADICT THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE FORMULATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES...

Beyond such methodological difficulties, many academic studies have demonstrated the theoretical relevance of think tanks for democratic and healthy decision making processes. As aptly captured by Wallace (1998), "think tanks deal in 'soft power'—the term coined by Nye (2000)—in shaping policy agendas, in challenging the language and terminology of public debate, in redefining the mental maps of policy-makers. These are all subtle processes, the workings of which are harder to trace than the direct impact of hard political bargaining, but which set the terms within which political bargaining is conducted in modern political systems." McGann, Weaver (2000) in fact list six important roles which think tanks usually play in relation to policy formulation: they carry out "basic research on policy problems and policy solutions"; they provide "advice on immediate policy concerns that are being considered by government officials"; they evaluate government programs, they "serve as facilitators of issue networks and the exchange of ideas"; they "serve as suppliers of personnel to government and as a place for politicians and policy-makers who are out of power to recharge their batteries"; and they help interpret "policies and current events for the electronic and print media."

Kingdon (1984) himself highlighted the role played by academics, researchers, and consultants in promoting new issues onto the agenda, and more importantly, in offering a range of alternatives to decision-makers. He described in particular how academics and researchers were essential in laying the groundwork for deregulation in different economic sectors. What Kingdon also found was that "academics might well affect the alternatives more than governmental agendas" over the long run. As Wallace (1998) concludes, "new issues crowd onto the public agenda (...), on which generalist policy-makers must turn to the contending recommendations of expert advisors before they can grasp the choices to be made. The political demand for the services, which think tanks can offer is thus likely to increase further, in all highly developed industrial and post-industrial societies. It is therefore likely that the supply of institutionalised expertise, packaged in different ways to fit the requirements of political debate and policy-makers will continue to grow in response."

... TO A DEMOCRATIC DEBATE ...

As highlighted again by McGann and Weaver in *Think Tanks and Civil Societies* (2000; see also Smith, 1991), think tanks have the "potential to provide an important element of what is known as civil society or the third sector," which contribution to democratisation, however difficult to measure, is also widely recognised. McGann and Weaver insist: "It is our contention that think tanks are an integral part of the civil society and serve as an important catalyst for ideas and action in emerging and advanced democracies around the world." Can the very clear case Greenwood (2003) makes about interest groups' contribution to E.U. decision-making institutions to help them with devising policies and for "taking issues to the doors of Member State governments and to everyday citizens" be extended to E.U. think tanks ?

More generally, however uncertain their impact, think tanks presumably contribute to the livelihood of democratic debates. To use a common expression, they contribute to the 'marketplace for ideas'. In this respect, the greater the number of think tanks, the greater competition between them and with other institutions responsible for formulating plans and political strategies. This should, in principle, stimulate the intellectual production regarding public policies. Without determining now what is think tanks' capacity to renew political alternatives and agendas, one can note that most think tanks make explicit their ambition to innovate intellectually. As Wallace (1998) underlines, think tanks have in principle two fundamental roles: "the questioning of the conventional wisdom" and "the formulation and dissemination of alternative concepts and policy agendas." Hopefully, think tanks' desire to challenge prevailing frameworks, to "think outside the box", to work "at the 'cutting-edge' of European policy-making" (EPC), to "think ahead for Europe" (CEPS), to encourage politicians to act boldly¹⁴ helps fight political apathy and conformity of ideas that can damage the health of our democracies. As Sunstein (2003) explains in *Why Societies Need Dissent*, actors such as think tanks have, potentially, a crucial role to play in making freedom of speech and thought real and in promoting dissidence and true democracy.

Finally, think tanks' relevance is perhaps further justified by the so-called 'democratic deficit' between E.U. institutions and E.U. citizens, a common preoccupation in E.U. politics. Without initiating a detailed discussion of this concept, better described elsewhere (e.g. Baun, 1996;

Dinan, 1999; McCormick, 2002), the lack of public accountability in the Union clearly affects the operations of E.U. think tanks that follow European affairs. Many people see the Union as distant, believe that important decisions are taken behind 'closed doors', and anticipate that their ability to influence and supervise E.U. institutions will be further threatened by the accession of ever more Member States and the transfer of further elements of national sovereignty to the E.U. level. As we shall see, many think tanks believe they have a role to play in this area.

... AND TO MEMBER STATES AND THE E.U.'S DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

Think tanks' potential contribution can also be seen in the context of a Union of states based on negotiation and compromise, and which seek to play a greater international role. A country's 'soft power' is, in principle, enhanced if it hosts a thriving think tank sector. Pierre Lepetit, Executive Director of IFRI in Paris (Institut Français des Relations Internationales) argues: "An international marketplace of ideas on public policies, where competition is now intense, is emerging." (Gadault, 2004)¹⁵ As the exchange of ideas and political options from one country to another is presumably facilitated by the same mechanisms that stimulate globalisation, it is legitimate to speculate that political recommendations also have an increasing impact beyond their country of origin. Considering the current domination of North-American think tanks on the international scene, this is a significant issue for the Union and its Member States.

Generally speaking, think tanks have therefore the potential to engage citizens in varied and concrete ways in the management of society. They can contribute, at least in theory, to a sustainable and democratic community construction process. In fact, this is why one of our selection criterion is that think tanks should aim to contribute to the public good. It is indeed a common aspiration of all think tanks, albeit often implicit, as we shall see in Section 2.1.3.¹⁶ Last but not least, this perspective warrants, in our opinion, a closer examination of who think tanks are and how they work, in order to understand whether they in fact live up to their inherent promise. This is what we shall do in the following section.

⁴ James Allen Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite*, New York: The Free Press, 1991. R. Kent Weaver, "The Changing Work of Think Tanks", in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, XXII (3), September 1989. Previous studies focused on specific cases, such as D.T. Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916-52: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society*, Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press. The bulk dates back however essentially to the last decade, e.g. Jeffrey Telgarsky et Makiko Ueno, eds. *Think Tanks in a Democratic Society: An Alternative Voice*, Washington DC: The Urban Institute, 1996; Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think Tanks and the Economic Counter Revolution, 1931-1983*, London: Harper Collins U.K., 1994.

⁵ Research on interest groups is relatively rich, including sociological analyses (symbolic functions of a group, mobilisation of resources), psychological (what members seek in taking part in political activities, how single issue groups can motivate members beyond any other issue...), and political (relations between the state and civil society organisations, and what role groups play in the decision making process).

⁶ For an overview of studies of think tanks, see Abelson (2002, pp.49-57). He explains how such studies have been organised around three schools of thought: elitist, pluralist, and epistemic communities.

⁷ Sherrington (2000) provides such an E.U.-wide analysis. The articles published in McGann, Weaver (2000) and Stone, Denham, Garnett (1998) also put think tanks and their political and institutional context into perspective.

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- ⁸ As Stone stresses: "It is increasingly evident that some think tanks have become global policy actors or, at the very least, policy informants. Many think tanks are building regional and international networks. While think tank networks are not new, over the past two decades the scale and density of exchange within these networks has mounted significantly and extended from North American and European institutes to include a more globally diverse range of organisations." (Stone, 2000a) As we will see, this is indeed an important aspect of E.U. think tank developments.
- ⁹ Day refers to these think tanks as the 'establishment think tanks'.
- ¹⁰ A good example of a truly transnational organisation is the International Institute for Strategic Studies (1958), which has offices in London, Washington and Singapore and whose analysis of 'political-military conflicts' is aimed at international policy-makers. Its members are based in more than 100 countries.
- ¹¹ This is a typical case of the chicken and egg problem: did these think tanks *cause* the change in government policy or did they simply provide *ex-post* intellectual legitimacy for Thatcher's policies? The problem is that these think tanks would like to claim credit for these changes but it is difficult to assess their impact.
- ¹² Think tanks of course like to take credit for major changes in government policy, such as the one seen in the UK in the 1980s. However, there is a legitimate debate about whether think tanks' ideas are actually the catalyst for policy changes, or whether they simply "piggy-back" on more general changes in the intellectual climate (cf. for instance Cockett (1994), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution 1931-1983*, and Denham & Garnett (1988), *British Think Tanks and the Climate of Opinion*, on the influence of the free-market think tanks in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s). A third way of interpreting their influence – and one which perhaps combines these two positions – is to argue that think tanks play an important role in changing the "climate of opinion" in national political debates. Exactly how they achieve this is hard to measure, but could involve coverage in the media of their ideas and politicians reading their work. Although this process may take many years before it comes to fruition, it may nonetheless be a necessary precondition for a paradigmatic shift in government policy-making, such as that seen in the UK after 1979.
- ¹³ Numerous think tanks point out that their ideas, when they are taken up, are rarely attributed since, according to them, politicians do not like to admit that they have had to rely on the help of outside researchers for their ideas. As Kingdon emphasizes, the genealogy of a policy idea is difficult to determine.
- ¹⁴ E.g. the Lisbon Council for Economic Competitiveness wants "politicians to be bold and to take more effective action".
- ¹⁵ Besides, IFRI has coined the term "intellectual diplomacy" to underline its contribution to France's intellectual and international political influence. This is also a role highlighted by other research centres. Gaudault (2004), in support of the sector, argues that "these research institutes specialising in international relations and defence are an essential part of the diplomatic influence of a country and of its capacity to influence decisions taken in large international organisations."
- ¹⁶ Many in fact state explicitly that the wish to contribute to the "general interest of Europe" (e.g. see Website of the Institut Choiseul in France).