

# Social Science Expertise and Policymaking. Comparing U.S., French, and EU Think Tanks: Similar Model Different Paths

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The relationship between social science and policymaking, marked with “tension and ambiguity,” is one that scholars never ceased to be perplexed about (Anderson 2003). My research seeks to shed light on the interaction between the two by comparing how the “think tank model of expertise,” first developed in the U.S., is being emulated in the EU and in France where the political systems and the structures of social knowledge traditionally called for a different use of social science research. By looking at the comparative evolution of the think tank model I also wish to question the building of the expert as a modern figure that bridges a discursive regimen of “knowledge claim” used in the scientific world and a regimen of “truth-claim” consistent with political discourses (Veitl 2005; Leclerc 2001). Scrutinizing the activities of think tanks as a place where “experts” claim to inform and influence policymakers is, in that sense, a way to revisit and rethink the relations between power and knowledge (Ihl 2006).

The term *think tank* refers to non-profit, independent, public policy research institutes. This very broad definition encompasses organizations that are diverse in terms of resources, personnel, or specialization. Some aspects of the American political system are believed to contribute to the emergence and growth of think tanks. On top of a favorable fiscal status that helped them secure financing for their operations, the openness of the legislative process, the expansion of the federal government and the government-contract research opportunities it created, the weakness of political parties agenda setting capabilities, and the need of readily available government positions are all credited for the dynamism of the think tank world in the U.S.

Since the 1970s, think tanks in the U.S. have enjoyed a fair amount of success and their number, at the federal or at the local level, have been thriving (Rich 2004). If the oldest and most renowned think tanks, like the Brookings Institution, defend rigorous social science methods of inquiries in their studies, thus earning the name of “universities without students,” a new generation of institutes relies on a more ideologically driven agenda and are often described as “advocacy tanks.” The policy expertise of think tanks, once perceived as objective and reliable, is now described as more politicized and less credible (Rich and Weaver 1998). So far, this intensified politicization of think tanks expertise does not prevent them from receiving unprecedented amounts of attention and funding (Bumiller 2008).

A definitive answer on the impact think tanks really have on policymaking is hard to attain (Abelson 2002). Indeed, their influence is not always easily identifiable. For example, in their study on the repeal of the estate tax, Graetz and Shapiro (2005) showed that even though conservative think tanks were not active on the subject when the legislation was discussed in 2001; they were influential earlier on by providing well-crafted arguments for the measure and setting a favorable climate to repeal.

While they had been a common actor in American politics, in 1989 Dror deplored the scarcity of think tanks outside the U.S. However in recent years numerous think tanks have been created around the world.

The EU is an interesting field to study the influence of expertise on policymaking (Radaelli 1999; Saurugger 2002). Because of both the complexities of the EU political system and the policies it carries, European policymakers, as well as journalists and members of civil society, rely heavily on expert advice. Among the numerous organizations offering expertise, such as private consultants, public agencies, lobbies, and interest groups, it is now common to encounter think tanks dedicating their efforts to influencing European public policy. One of the first and most successful think tanks settled in Brussels; the Centre for European Policy Studies was founded in

1983 to explicitly become for the EU what the Brookings Institution is for the U.S. Its work has been particularly influential in the setting of the monetary union and the building of the European Central Bank. Think tanks specialized in EU affairs either operate directly from Brussels, for example the European Policy Center or Bruegel, or from a member-state, as the Notre Europe in Paris, the Centre for European Reform in London, or the Cicero Foundation in Maastricht.

In France, since the founding of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in 1939, the state has enjoyed a strong oversight of the institutional organization of research, including social science and public policy research. Enlightened independent voices were not, however, absent from public debates as the tradition of French public intellectuals demonstrates.

A limited number of non-profit organizations resembling think tanks such as the Institut Français des Relations Internationales has existed since the end of the 70s but only dealt with the niche market of defense and foreign relations. The Institut Montaigne was created in 2000 with the explicit purpose of emulating the Anglo-Saxon think tank model of expertise by carving concrete public policy proposals and actively promoting them towards policymakers and the general public. Its activities and the good coverage they received in the mainstream media prompted the creation of similar organizations.

The Fondation pour l’Innovation Politique appeared in 2004 and was partially financed by the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, the dominant right-wing party. It has since cut ties with the party and its status states its purpose is to develop conservative policy advice independently from partisan politics.

Some members of the parliamentary left felt that they also needed a structure that could promote progressive policy advice independently from political parties. Their effort gave birth to Terra Nova in 2008. Interestingly, Terra Nova cites as an influence the Center for American Progress that was created in the to counterbalancing the influence of conservative think tanks.

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