

What are 'Think Tanks'? Revisiting the Dilemma of the Definition*

Juliana Cristina Rosa Hauck

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil

'Think tanks' (TTs) are 'sui generis' organizations that have been proliferating, playing more and more the role of very relevant actors on the political scene in clashes over interests, preferences and ideas for the formation of public policies. The definition of 'think tank', however, creates a conceptual gap that causes serious limitations on the development of this field of study. Excessive generality or inflexibility in the use of the concept raises questions about the validity of the category. Either way, the 'trade offs' of the conceptual choices have delineated a not very useful concept of think tank to both inter-contextual and inter-organizational comparability and to differentiate think tanks from overlapping organizations. The article revisits some of these dilemmas. To do so, the treatment in the specialized literature of the analytic category, highlighting both the insensitivity of the traditional North American matrix to different national contexts and its obsolescence to the changes in the context of TTs' action, including their own context of origin, is explained. In shedding light on promising conceptual contributions, the main contribution of the present article is the proposal of the radial structuring of the concept of think tanks as 'boundary spanners', as advanced by Medvetz, and of corresponding indicators to deal with the large variation in the substantive properties of the operationalization of the adopted concept. Thus, the aim is to reduce non-specificities in the analytic category and the dissent of its social significance, which demands less abstraction facing the exploratory state of the field of study.

Keywords: Think tanks; concept operationalization; radial concept; organizations; categories of analysis.

In the universe of actors who seek to gain attention in the political scene, 'think tanks' (TTs) appear as a relatively new type of actors in many countries, but in large proliferation. They are generically understood as organizations that conduct research on public policies and seek to influence, through the promotion of their ideas, the formation of these policies. The Brookings Institute, Heritage Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Chatham House, Rand Corporation, Transparency International, Centre for European Policy Studies and Fundação Getúlio Vargas are among the most cited, internationally (McGANN, 2014; 2015; 2016)¹.

Experiencing considerable worldwide explosion in recent years, from 04 thousand institutions in 2005 to nearly 6.9 thousand in 2015 (McGANN, 2016; McGANN AND JOHNSON, 2005), the specialized literature provides strong indications of growing relevance, especially in public policies (PPs)² and public opinion³. Among the studies dedicated to think tanks, many focus on English⁴ language countries and, secondarily, on developing, transitional countries and former members of the soviet bloc⁵. More recently, we found approaches to their more progressively transnational action⁶. Few of the more recent studies, however, approach the issue of what a think tank is, in modern times. The debate about the definition of an analytic category that represents it properly, slightly prominent in the 1990s, has cooled off during the 2000s (PAUTZ, 2011), pointing out that "the dilemma of the definition has never been really resolved" (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 01).

Conceptual stretching (SARTORI, 1970) or watertight rigor in the characterization of the concept is commonly found in studies about think tanks. In order to gain global applicability of the concept, its extension (the set of cases included) has

¹ The Global Go To Think Tank Index Report is an annual ranking built through collaborative research from the University of Pennsylvania with nearly 1,900 institutions and experts from print and electronic media, academia, public and private financiers, and world governments. See <http://www.gotothinktank.com/thinktank>.

² See Abelson, 2009; Garcé, 2010; Gros, 2004; Longhini, 2013; McGann, 2011; McGann and Johnson, 2005; McGann and Weaver, 2002; Medvetz, 2012; Rich, 2004; Rigolin and Hayashi, 2013; Stone and Denham, 2004; Stone, Denham and Garnett, 1998.

³ See Abelson, 2011b; Abelson, 2009; Alterman, 2011; Rich, 2005.

⁴ Abelson, 2009; Ahmad, 2008; Hart and Vromen, 2008; McGann, 2007; Marsh and Stone, 2004; Pautz, 2007; Rich, 2004; Schlesinger, 2009; Teitz, 2009; Weindenbaum, 2008; to name a few.

⁵ Garcé and Uña, 2010; McGann and Johnson, 2005; McGann and Weaver, 2002; Mendizábal and Sample, 2009; Stone, 2005; Stone and Denham, 2004; Stone, Denham and Garnett, 1998; Struyk, 1999; Truitt, 2002, among others.

⁶ Boucher et al., 2004; Hart and Vromen, 2008; McGann and Sabatini, 2011; Parmar, 2004; Stone and Denham, 2004; Struyk, 2002.

been excessively expanded, to the detriment of its intensity (referring to the attributes or characterizations that compose a particular concept); or, its intensity has been extreme, in order to limit its extension only to the ideal types. Either way, however, the 'trade offs' of the conceptual choices have delineated a not very useful concept of think tank, both referring to inter-contextual and inter-organizational comparability, and to differentiate them from overlapping organizations.

The more traditional concepts of think tanks, from the North American matrix, where these organizations are more prominent in the political process, are insufficient to encompass the complexity acquired by the hybridizations imposed on the TTs in other national contexts. However, even in the US, facing the metamorphoses of the TT environment during recent decades, this matrix is shown to be obsolete. In this sense, beyond the insensitivity of the traditional conceptual matrix to local specificities, an historic inadequacy of the concept is found making its classic attributes obsolete, even in the context of its origin.

The objective of the present review essay, therefore, is to revisit some of these dilemmas. To do so, we attempt to explain how the analytic category of think tank has been defined in the specialized literature, in different national contexts, highlighting points of release and shedding light on promising contributions to the study of the phenomenon in its contemporary features. The main contribution of the present essay, however, in addition to reviewing the specialized literature, is the radial structuring of the concept of think tanks as organizations connecting the borders (boundary spanners) brought by Medvetz (2012) and the proposal of indicators for dealing with the large variation of the substantive properties in the operationalization of the adopted concept. Thus, we sought to reduce the lack of specificities in the analytic category that demands less abstraction given the exploratory state of the field of study and the dissent of its social meaning to support the comparative use and its distinction from other organizations. We try to do it, however, without doing damage to the comprehensive nature of the phenomenon.

Think tanks: a concept with(out) a dispute?

The seminal definitions of think tanks most cited in the literature converge significantly regarding their central attributes (ABELSON, 2009; MCGANN AND JONHSON, 2005; RICH, 2004; STONE, 2001; WEAVER, 1989). Notably, there are at least

two attributes that appear most: organizational and financial autonomy of the government and social interests (interest and pressure groups, political parties and businesses); and, central and extensive engagement in the conduct of research/production of expertise. These attributes, however, denote mismatches with contemporary features of the phenomenon of think tanks in different aspects. In the first place, they are greatly informed by the context of Anglo-Saxon countries, the environment of the origin of think tanks. In addition, they disregard not only contemporary elements which modify the forms of acting of political actors, in the face of the enormous competitiveness in the context of action (the plurality of actors in the political arenas and the scarcity of resources for survival), the opportunistic use of the label by other contending actors in the political arenas, but also the interweaving of local and global flows. We discuss each of these aspects below, exemplifying in the literature the detachment between the analytic categories of reference and the evolution of the phenomenon as a whole.

Hybridizations in different national contexts

Some authors point out that the first proliferation wave of think tanks began concomitantly in the US and the UK at the turn of the 20th century (ABELSON, 2009; MCGANN AND WEAVER, 2002; START and HOVLAND, 2004), and that think tanks appear in a more significant way outside the Anglo-Saxon axis only after the 1970s (MCGANN and JOHNSON, 2005; STONE AND DENHAM, 2004). As different national contexts began to be included in the studies, the existence of large institutional differences and very diverse forms of articulation among think tanks, corporations and the State reveal diversified national traditions on the theme (GARCÉ, 2010, p. 273).

The study of these new contexts, however, is rooted in the original matrix – especially the Anglo-Saxon – inserted into a western, developed and industrial context, and for which the definition of TTs is based on the autonomy from governments and the independence of social interests. Classified according to these attributes, however, the universe of TTs is restricted to a small number of organizations in most countries and, in others, does not even seem to exist. Even in the North American context, this autonomy is also relative, since TTs are frequently in resource-dependent relationships with other organizations (STONE AND DENHAM, 2004, p. 03) and the growing competitiveness of the political setting in these countries has been altering the action of the TTs.

In Western Europe, the government finances 75% of German TTs, so that public organizations are frequently included in the studies (THUNERT, 2004, p. 71; THUNERT, 2011). Similarly, the particular relationship between the French think tanks and the state or policy sphere makes the separation between public and political intellectuals a fine line, leaving few French think tanks fitting perfectly into the definition most commonly used (DESMOULINS, 2002, p. 139; FIESCHI and GAFFNEY, 2004, p. 106). Studies about the Iberian case also reflect this reality, including completely private and independent institutions as well as governmental and quasi-governmental institutions (FRERES et al., 2002, p. 187).

The insensitivity of the concept, anchored in the autonomy for cases in the developed western context, is reiterated by eastern cases. In Japan, there are practically no think tanks independent of the government or of industry (UENO, 2002, p. 166). Classifications of Chinese TTs consider institutions affiliated to governmental agencies, or "official think tanks", as one of the most common types (YE, 2011, p. 27). The Korean categories of think tanks encompass "institutions of governmental research affiliated to governmental ministries" (CHOI, 2002, p. 243). Many TTs in Southeast Asia are semi-independent of governments or political figures (STONE, 2005, p. 42).

In Latin American, the reestablishment of democracy, only in the 1980s (BRAUN et al., 2004; HAUCK, 2015), requires the use of a broader definition for Argentine think tanks (BRAUN et al, 2004, p. 199). Also, in the Brazilian context, the term can be applied to governmental entities (CHACEL, 2002; HAUCK, 2015; RIGOLIN and HAYASHI, 2013; SOARES, 2009; SILVA, 2012). In Africa, in the Nigerian case, university think tanks and those independent of the government are either few or very recent in the country (OBADAN and UGA, 2002, p. 509). Yet, they rely on institutional and financial support from the government.

The several most cited definitions were developed by authors who follow the line of thinking that establishes the various autonomies (financial, ideological, research agenda) as determinants for the classification of a think tank. They are, however, according to the authors, insufficient for understanding the phenomenon in contexts other than the Anglo-Saxon, or even the North American, which is considered more pure. The affiliative or relational nature of think tanks is a constitutive feature of the category. It is conditioned not only by the socio-economic and political context in which it is found but, essentially, by its dependence on third-party financial and institutional resources.

Implications of activities developed by other political actors

Additional obstacles to guide the analytic category of think tanks emerge when the organizations that opportunistically appropriate the term understand the authority attributed to them as 'advisors of the truth' (HART and VROMEN, 2008, p. 138; McGANN and WEAVER, 2002, p. 08; MISZTAL, 2012, p. 139). In order to legitimize their interests and obtain greater penetration in the political process, the organizations call themselves 'think tanks' or are structured to be perceived as such. For them, to become a TT "is to be above the mere policy based on interests and to claim the symbolic dividends that are obtained from the association with the producers of specialized knowledge" (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 03). Intense debate has been produced in this regard, especially in the US⁷, and traditional 'think tanks' have frequently rejected the label, avoiding association with these organizations (RICH, 2004, p.13).

The explosion in numbers of TTs in the US has not been followed proportionally by an expansion of influence due to the credibility undermined by the ideological biases of some organizations (RICH, 2005). Moreover, the appearance of "phantom NGO think tanks" (McGANN, 2011, p. 14) and the action of public relations businesses through false think tanks focused on the promotion of their clients' interests (GRAVES, 2013) have greatly impacted the social meaning of TTs. In Europe, British think tanks have also become public relations businesses for those that finance them, avoiding direct political controversies while nevertheless influencing the debate (MONBIOT, 2013). The Freedom House classification of NGOs, advocacy organizations and activist movements as TTs, sparks the question of what a think tank is, in post-communist Europe (KRASTEV, 2001). Within the governance framework of the European Commission, the convening of TTs to voluntarily register as lobbyists is a reflection of the concern with the gray areas of think tank action and lobbying activities (BRAUN-DORELL, 2014). In Latin America, Brazilian institutions, which claim to be think tanks, appear more relevant to public opinion and have been endorsed as such by relevant global

⁷ See Abelson, 1995; Alterman, 2011; Bartlett, 2012; Bbc, 2013; Callahan, 1999; Ciandella, 2013; Denham and Garnett, 1999; Economist, 2007; Euroactiv, 2009; Gilroy, 2012; Graves, 2013; Krugman, 2005; Lee and Keyes, 2011; MacGann, 2011; Medvetz, 2012a; Monbiot, 2011; Rich, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2011, 2012; Rich and Weaver, 2000; Willians and Silverstein, 2013; Willis, 2009, among others.

references⁸, even distancing themselves from the traditional conceptions of think tanks, especially as they refer to the production of expertise (HAUCK, 2016).

Growing competitiveness in the context of action

A scenario of accelerated competitiveness in the context of action of think tanks has asserted the imbrications mentioned above by meeting this opportunistic appropriation. To survive in a context of increasing entry barriers, scarcity of resources and plurality of actors in political arenas, think tanks have changed their organizational priorities. Dependents on non-reimbursable third-party resources, more defined ideological positions, intense marketing of ideas and concessions in the scientific rigor in studies commissioned to generate revenue have become increasingly common in the universe of TTs.

For most of the 20th century, although their work was used for political purposes, the first 'think tanks' were kept ostensibly neutral and separate from the political process (RICH, 2004, p. 205). Their characterization as "universities without students" (WEAVER, 1989), denotes the centrality of the academic research agenda in these organizations. In the US, the new 'vintages' of TTs, ideologically oriented and geared to the marketing of ideas, is the result of a process of ideologizing of politics itself (RICH, 2004, p. 30). The discussion showed, therefore, the change of priority of the research by the advocacy in the sociopolitical phenomenon of think tanks, highlighting the dilemma between visibility and scientific rigor (PIGLIUCCI, 2010), marking an ideologically 'charged' evolution of the phenomenon (MISTZAL, 2012, p. 129). Especially, for TTs beyond governmental or university supervision, the imperative to promote their ideas is a factor for attracting financiers, who assume an influential role in the agenda of the TTs (CORREA, 2009).

Thus, some of the new 'think tanks' recall the policy-makers (KINGDON, 2003), the permanent persuaders (GRAMSCI *apud* PAUTZ, 2011, p. 426) or the third face of power (LUKES, 1980 *apud* HART and VROMEN, 2008, p. 138). In these terms, they focus on "model terms, times and places where the policy issues are debated; and, are first and foremost managers of ideas and discourse" (*idem*). The balance of priorities is changing from the maximization of capabilities for the production of knowledge to the

⁸ See McGann (2016).

management of complex networks of political processes and the brokering of ideas, relegating expertise to an auxiliary position for the creation of space for persuasion.

If the public image together with greater access to policy makers favor access to financing, therefore, the greater the number of organizations competing for the same sources, the greater the need to show visibility and ability to influence these audiences. This may imply, however, concession in the process of knowledge production (ideological and scientific-methodological) as well as in the shifting of the central axis of the activity of these research organizations to generate visibility and political access. This process has contributed greatly to an intense scrutiny of think tanks, putting their credibility at risk (ABELSON, 2009, pp. 10-11). If, on the one hand, TTs place greater and greater emphasis on the marketing of ideas, and interest groups invest more in research capabilities, the characteristics that distinguish them become increasingly vague.

Studies that discuss the waves of think tank proliferation reiterate this process by enlarging their framework of action along a continuum that ranges from research centers engaged in the debate about PPs, the agenda of the origin of TTs, to organizations with explicit ideological and partisan direction (ABELSON and LINDQUIST, 2002; DENHAM and GARNETT, 2004; LINDQUIST, 2004; MEDVETZ, 2012a; RICH, 2004). Both the 'ideologization' of think tanks and the use of the 'think tank' label by opportunistic organizations confer features onto the field of think tanks that challenge the definitions coined by many scholars, since TTs oriented to the activities of ideological advocacy and the marketing of ideas present a dynamic different from the originals.

Acceleration of global flows: globalization and ICTs

Globalizing movements and the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) support new areas of political interaction and deliberation, thus creating new dynamics for actors interested in working in these arenas. Access to the knowledge produced in other spaces, and the production of collaborative knowledge in formal distance learning environments afforded by the ICTs, enable new models of production and dissemination of knowledge that reduce the effects of limited financing (HART AND VROMEN, 2008, p. 137). Organizations appear that are "quasi-virtual: a small, permanent team that manages a frequently extensive network of specialists, financiers, partners and clients" (idem). These movements support the adaptation of

'think tanks' oriented beyond the nation-state, financed by international organizations and, therefore, removed from specific national identities, in a form of transnationalization of TTs (STONE and DENHAM, 2004, p. 10).

These advances and the rise of global agendas generate opportunities for think tanks to gain global influence (STONE, 2009, 2015)⁹, requiring different paths from traditional think tanks, directed at instances and dynamics of the global political context (McGANN AND SABATINI, 2011). Further, even at the national level, in order to become relevant, many times they address problems that are, from the intensification of globalizing movements, inherently global (MISZTAL, 2012). The organization in virtual networks appears as a key variable in the growth and internationalization of think tanks, creating opportunities to disseminate research and to advocate for ideas before a broader, global audience (McNUTT AND MARCHILDON, 2009). These new flows constitute a new generation of TTs that operate by other means, prioritize other activities and are affiliated with other types of actors.

Considerations about incongruencies of the traditional analytic category

The specifics of each national context not only determine the process of creation and proliferation of 'think tanks', but also are frequently seen as determinants for the conforming of their characteristics regarding the organizational-legal form, the profile of the specialists, affiliations for financial support, ideological bias and strategies for the dissemination of ideas to influence their target audience¹⁰. "Different institutional and cultural contexts affect TT modes of operation and capacity or opportunity for political *input* and influence (...) in this way, not surprisingly, the development of TTs among nations is largely unequal" (STONE and DENHAM, 2004, p. 05). Given this, the use of a

⁹ Stone (2015) addresses the case of Think20 - a network of think tanks linked to the G20 Group - in which private think tanks project their ideas about global economic governance. Stone (2009) discusses the case of the Overseas Development Institute, a London-based TT with an extensive network outside the UK with which it interacts to build its global orientation.

¹⁰ Political regime, system of government, constitutional changes and government reform; intensity of the political debate and opposition; attitudes of political leaders; strength and insulation of the bureaucracy; political culture of the society; levels of literacy and freedom of the press; development of an intellectual elite; history and strength of philanthropy; among others, these are factors that the literature indicates as able to open and close opportunities for think tanks, depending on how they are configured and combined (McGANN and JOHNSON, 2005; STONE and DENHAM, 2004).

watertight concept, that does not offer analytic attributes adaptable to the distinct realities, invites the conceptual stretching or sub-dimensioning of the phenomenon.

At the same time, the historic changes which confer an imperative character on the activities associated with the search for third-party resources by the TTs, model survival arrangements as diverse as the instabilities and adversities of the scenario. They engage in a breadth of activities related or not to the political universe and include a varied set of institutions (McGANN AND WEAVER, 2002, p. 03). Showing ever more overlapping functions and formats with governmental policy advising units, academic research institutes, interest groups and 'advocacy' organizations, and frequently formalizing direct affiliations with these organizations, the TTs appears as gray areas. The gray areas associated with the little elucidative effort to define a 'think tank' assert the vagueness about what a 'think tank' is or is not. In the opportunism of the lack of a definition, the label, as a retainer of authoritative scientific credibility, is held by other contending actors in the political process.

For complex contexts of political interaction and deliberation, from globalization movements with a transnational nature such as integration blocs, multilateral organizations and supranational agendas, the traditional category is even more fragile. Defining attributes of the traditional definition, like the priority of conducting research activity, do not necessarily apply. The context of action is no longer national and counts on a greater variety of actors becoming more diffuse and complex. Policy issues extend to causes of international or multilateral interest. Dealing with these transnational 'think tanks' under traditional definitions confers an unfeasible elasticity to the concept.

The analytic category of think tank, from the more traditional matrix of studies of the theme shows, both in its field of study and in its practical application, a pendular movement. On the one hand, signs of conceptual stretching raise questions about the validity of the category as the versatility and breadth of the concept increase. On the other hand, excessive inflexibility of the concept makes it unable to encompass the intra- and inter-contextual national phenomena, making it of little use for the exploratory state of the field. Lacking a structured debate about the analytic category, the term has lost its usefulness. As a result, the comparison, which requires conceptual tools that can "travel" (SARTORI, 1970), is threatened by the loss of the control center – the analytic category of reference.

If defining or redefining a term appropriately means to (re)establish its relation with neighboring terms and to contribute to the unveiling of one more aspect in a field of study (GERRING, 1999), how can we construct a definition that is sensitive to the affiliative nature of TTs and, at the same time, capable of differentiating them from the opportunistic organizations which take advantage of this label? How can we include the possibilities of institutional arrangements which think tanks have been making in their actions given the historical changes and the environment into which they are inserted? How can we construct an analytic category that supports comparability and is capable of moving about in the disparity of the contexts in which TTs act?

Gaining extension coverage, minimizing losses as much as possible in denotative precision, especially in a field of study still in an exploratory stage, may mean choosing versions of the concept under construction that allow this exploration but which maintain control of a conceptual core and support comparability. Even if this means invalidating, 'a posteriori', the appropriateness of the initial framework of selected cases, arising from the mutual and persistent dialogue between concept and empirical analyses.

Revisiting the concept of think tanks

For many authors, think tanks are defined in an excessively narrow and idealized perspective leading them up the "ladder of generality"¹¹ and adopting a broader concept. Some few authors have pointed objectively the implications of that excessively comprehensive use of the definition and have attempted versions more consistent with the contemporary features of the phenomenon.

Pautz (2011) discusses the attributes of the traditional matrix of concepts about think tanks – non-governmental, non-profit, independent of government interests and societal other interests – seeking to propose a more precise definition. However, he maintains the axis of the concept around financial and organizational independence and non-governmental nature of organizations. These aspects (the financial and organizational autonomy and the non-governmental nature), as already explained, are compromised in contexts where the main origin of 'think tanks' is governmental, or

¹¹ The ladder of generality or abstraction, as defined by Sartori (1970, p. 1041), is a technique that consists of expanding the extent of a concept by reducing its attributes or properties; that is, by reducing its connotation, increasing the abstraction to encompass a greater diversity of empirical instances.

whose philanthropic culture is insufficient for the financial sustainability of non-governmental organizations, which relativizes those autonomies. However, it recognizes the contemporary mix between the performance of actual research and editing/compiling of studies conducted by other organizations. He highlights the contradiction of the claim of political neutrality of the TTs, even without making his ideological positioning secret. He differentiates the 'modus operandi' of TTs in the process of seeking influence guided more by intellectual argumentation than by articulations from behind the scenes or from 'lobbies'. He also deconstructs the idea of TTs as passive intermediaries, or bridges between knowledge and power, but rather as providers of elaborate conceptual discourse.

Stone (2007) attributes the conceptual stretching of TTs to the diversity of organizations which intermediate specialized knowledge, civil society and the State, intermingling them. Therefore, he reiterates that the classic concept of TTs, from the Anglo-American tradition, is inappropriate to how the phenomenon occurs in the world. He contributes to the discussion by deconstructing myths about TTs. He points out that positioning them as bridges between knowledge and power maintains the distinctions between science and politics as two different fields of human enterprise, generating an unrealistic perception of these organizations as neutral, public intermediaries. He considers that the dynamics of TTs focused on the elites and based on complex knowledge do not bring them closer to public interest, which makes it impossible to reflect truthfully on it. In addition, they are subject to market pressures which lead them to opportunistic behaviors and to focus on private, individual or organizational interests. Therefore, for that author, thinking is no longer the exclusive occupation of TTs: they have played roles such as policy makers (think-and-do tanks) and in training, consulting, marketing, public relations and articulation. Increasingly, they edit research, translating studies of others for the general public and 'policy makers'. Therefore, more than thinking, they play a role in establishing the terms of political research and independent analysis.

Medvetz, (2012a), in turn, highlights that the image of 'think tanks' oscillates between two extremes. On the one hand is the overbearing public intellectual, "the thinker that occupies a privileged sanctuary of independent reflection" (MEDVETZ, 2012b, p. 02). On the other hand is the "intellectual mercenary, the undisguised lobbyists, whose high organizational position is merely a front to promote an ideology

or a cause". In order to resolve the issue, he proposes a conceptualization of TTs in terms of their distinctive location in the social structure according to Bourdieu's conceptions of social space¹² and field of power¹³ (MEDVETZ, 2008). For him, 'think tanks' lack their own field of power and have been using different types of capital from other fields of power and positioning themselves in these social spaces to overcome the entry barriers to the political context. They assert themselves as disseminators of ideas and policy advisors, thus guaranteeing the resources for survival.

The condition of existence of TTs focuses primarily on obtaining four results, based on the idioms of four fields of power: the idiom of policy, to gain political access; the idiom of academia, to gain intellectual credibility; the idiom of business¹⁴, to gain resources for their operations and survival; and, the idiom of media, to gain public visibility with their target audiences. In these terms, organizations under TTs are oriented to the multiplicity of social universes that pursue these results. To do so, TTs exist in a relation of symbolic dependence with other institutions in which they lend and incorporate their established forms, strategies and procedures (MEDVETZ, 2010)¹⁵.

¹² Bourdieu defines social space as the form of representation by which any social structure can be represented as a multidimensional system of positions, ordered by the volume and composition of authority (capital), organizing relations among individuals, groups and classes (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 04).

¹³ Field of power denotes specifically the upper portion of the social space in which the holders of authority compete on the "exchange rates" or relative values of the different types of capital (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 04).

¹⁴ Field of business, or entrepreneurship, as Medvetz sometimes defines it, refers to the idea that, to survive, a think tank needs to "sell itself" or sell its projects to potential financiers, using, although in a heterodox way, means of persuasion whose nuance refers to the business environment. In some studies by the author (MEDVETZ, 2008; MEDVETZ, 2010), the expression "economic field of power" is used more commonly. More recent studies use the term "business field of power" (MEDVETZ, 2012a; MEDVETZ, 2012b). In agreement with his more vital work, we have adopted the term "business" to name the field of power that refers to the financial survival of think tanks and to the behaviors that this imperative infringes upon those organizations.

¹⁵ According to Medvetz (2010, p. 550), the 'think tanker' as an academic has a keen mind with advanced academic training and sharp analytical skills. He is relatively free of both partisan and political biases and economic constraint, and has a trajectory of academic titles that confer intellectual or academic credibility. As political advisors, they are familiar with the rules of the political order, the procedural details, the temporal rhythms, and the norms of reciprocity that guide politics. They anticipate "hot" issues before they emerge and quickly dispatches counseling reports. As an entrepreneur in the "market of ideas", they promote their intellectual products to three types of consumers: legislators, who buy ideas incorporating them into policies; financiers, who give money to the 'think tank'; and journalists, who figuratively buy 'think tank' studies by citing them and their authors. And, it is from this activity that the TT gets its survival resources. As media experts, they must exhibit an ability to express themselves

Medvetz (2010) points out, however, that what seems a pursuit along the four facets of academic, political, business and media authorities is, in reality, an ambivalent, bipolar structure. This is because the objectives associated with three of the four idioms (political access, resources and visibility) align more easily with each other than with the pursuit of academic credibility. The criticisms made by the academic 'think tankers' present an obvious asymmetric pattern in the commitment to the idioms justifying why the TTs do not discard the academic model altogether. This idiom provides its authority and the symbolic separation of lobbyists, activists and political advisors; being, therefore, critical to the strategy as a whole. While each idiom reveals an important dimension of the role of think tanks, their essence is in their continuous efforts to balance and reconcile these contradictory functions (MEDVETZ, 2010, pp. 550-561).

Think tanks, therefore, are multiply heteronomous in relation to each parent institution because the academic, political, business and media criteria are all set within this social universe, making the 'think tank' space "a world divided against itself" (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 07-10). Therefore, the primary objective of the TT, even before exerting political influence, is to distinguish itself from its parent institutions, since its influence will not exist without this distinction. However, to disassociate itself completely from them is also impossible. First, the 'think tank' attempts to highlight its difference from universities, activist groups, state agencies and 'lobbying' firms; then it attempts to accumulate the various forms of authority that derive from the association with these institutions. In these terms, what goes under the title of 'think tank' is better understood not as a distinct type of organization per se, "but rather as an organizational device for gathering and assembling forms of authority conferred by the more established institutions of academics, politics, business, and the media" (MEDVETZ, 2008, p. 09).

With this approach, Medvetz (2012) introduces new elements to identify TTs as organizations that connect borders (boundary spanners) in the "space between fields". Thus, they are located at strategic juncture points, both within the organization itself and at the meeting point between organizations. If the border is a primordial part of what is at stake within the organization, its power is precisely in its ability to determine

comprehensibly to nonspecialists with ease and eloquence, as well as to possess the ability to identify what is potentially newsworthy.

where one activity officially ends and another begins. In this case, it is where the political, marketing and media production ends and the production of expertise begins.

Even using this approach, most consonant with the current features of TTs as elusive objects, there is great variation in the substantive properties shared by all members of the category: they are difficult to study rigorously. This leads to the analysis of think tanks, not as organizations of an entirely new and distinct type, but as constitutively vague networks of organizations, internally divided among themselves by the logics of academic, political, market and media production. It is exactly through this vagueness – and the freedoms and flexibilities that this characteristic provides – that the 'think tanks' exert a subtle but profound influence on politics (MEDVETZ, 2012b).

The mobilization of a radial concept and its operationalization

By separating the concept of 'think tank' from the idea of autonomy and identifying attributes for its differentiation from other, similar organizations, Medvetz' conceptions (2012a) show a category better adapted both to the contemporary features of the phenomenon and the hybridizations that the contexts in which they are found impose upon them. In particular, starting from its radial structuring¹⁶, which supports exploratory analyses for the flexibility in the calibration of its secondary attributes without losing control of the primary core of the definition, alternatives are found to the ladder of generality¹⁷, very widely used in the literature on this topic. The relevance of radial structuring to the category of think tank is justified by the intense variety of substantive properties that are not necessarily shared among cases. The practical consequence of the use of radial categories is that the extent of the secondary category

¹⁶ In the radial categories, the general meaning of the category is anchored in a 'central subcategory' which corresponds to the 'best case', or prototype, of the category. Variants that branch into a radial structure are viewed as subsets of the primary global category. They do not share the same manner and intensity of the attributes by which we would recognize the global category, as in the classical categories, "instead of this, they divide it" (COLLIER and MAHON, 1993, p. 848).

¹⁷ In terms of Collier and Mahon (1993, p. 847) the application of the ladder of generality is a good remedy for solving the conceptual problems of classic categories. However, in cases where there is not at least one attribute that all members of the category share, such as categories of family similarity, the solution is not satisfactory. For these cases, the application of the ladder of generality possibly implies the premature abandonment of the category. In the categories of family similarity, belonging is assessed by observing the variation in degrees of defining attributes rather than by their presence or absence, as in the classical categories. Thus, the use of radial structuring appears as an alternative solution to the use of the ladder of generality in the treatment of categories such as think tanks.

may exceed that of the primary category, without distorting it. That is, with the radial categories the secondary category may be more extensive, while with the classic categories the primary category is more extensive. Relatively, with classic categories, the conceptual stretching is frequently avoided by removing an adjective; while, with the radials, the conceptual stretching is frequently avoided by adding an adjective (COLLIER AND MAHON, 1993, p. 852). Thus, returning to the author's main positions, the most comprehensive radial concept of 'think tank' emerges:

...organizations focused on influencing the political process, directly or indirectly, with ideas related to public policies. After being generated or compiled by their specialists, different strategies are used to promote them – before the public opinion, the media, policy-makers and decision-makers, in a timely and opportune manner for the use of policy windows and fundraising to maintain their operations. To do so, organizational expediences from more established institutions are used to collect and assemble authority forms to bring them closer to their results of interest, namely: academic records, to generate intellectual credibility; records of political dynamics, to generate political access; entrepreneurial or businesses records, to generate resources and 'sell' their ideas; and, finally, records from media specialists, to generate publicity and visibility for these very ideas (HAUCK, 2015, p. 64).

Thus, any 'think tank' is, essentially, focused on influencing the political process, either directly or indirectly, with expertise and ideas related to public policies which they promote along with their target audiences – primary category. However, not all are dedicated equally to every organizational idiom of these fields of power and their respective results, even though they may be dedicated to all of them. Some present a stronger academic focus. Others are dedicated to building relationships with the financiers to 'sell' their ideas to the target audiences, even if they are generated or compiled from other research centers. There are also those dedicated to influencing public opinion, so that they are constantly in the media. Others, still, are more dedicated to following and taking advantage of the rhythm of political dynamics to present their ideas in a timely and opportune manner. Some may be dedicated to this marginally. Finally, it is these variations in the combination of dedication to organizational idioms of the fields of power which define them to reach the stated results of interest which compose their attributes, or secondary categories. However, essentially, they all claim the symbolic dividends of scientific, intellectual or academic authority to disseminate their concepts about the policy issues they wish to influence.

If the contributions, brought by this theoretical structure, project a favorable category for comparative exploration between intra- and inter-contextual cases, then how can the parameters for comparison, derived from the mobilized radial concept, be operationalized?

The framework of the empirical cases of an object of study in an analytic category is concretized with the proven evidence of its adherence to the attributes established as essential for its characterization. In terms of the concept used here, the listed attributes are organizational expediences – goal-oriented behavior. In this sense, indicators of engagement in the use of these organizational expediences by the TTs, either in terms of 'inputs' and the 'activities' to reach them or in terms of immediate 'outputs' deriving from these efforts, may function as 'proxies' of this framework. It is this approach that we used in the proposition of an operationalization of the mobilized radial concept of think tanks – the proposition of behavioral indicators (use of organizational expediences) geared toward goals related to the interests of a think tank.

The 'outcomes', or impact, are related to these goals: to exercise influence over the political scene and to survive. However, the performance impact of a TT does not invalidate the understanding of an organization, as such; therefore, measuring it is irrelevant to the framework of a case for the concept, even if it is for the survival of the TT, as such. The perspective of the impact justifies its reason for existing, and informs the direction of its efforts in the use of the idioms that it uses. It is concretized by the effective adoption by the 'policymakers' of the recommendations brought by a think tank; by making decisions clearly aligned with the precepts of a position defended by the TT; or, even, by the incorporation and reverberation, through public opinion, of the ideas propagated by an organization which acts as such – its impact on the target audiences. However, the simple 'modus operandi' aimed at the pursuit of these goals is what determines the framework of an organization as a think tank.

This means that an organization is a think tank when it is organized to make use of the organizational expediences from the fields of power it uses. Thus, effort indicators in each of these fields – directly associated with the pursuit of impact in the political context of interest – may serve as conceptual framework instruments of the TTs. In these terms, when using a political idiom, a TT seeks to place itself within the times, terms and spaces of the policy in order to influence the debate on the agenda based on political access. It is also done when human and financial resources are spent on

strategies to disseminate the ideas and results of its research in media spaces, seeking visibility. It anchors these ideas and produces this knowledge by engaging in scientific research or qualified compilation of the expertise produced by others, aiming for credibility. In order to survive with as much financial, research and institutional autonomy as possible, it seeks to obtain its survival resources by composing a diversified matrix of types and sources of financing, to avoid being co-opted by private or governmental interests.

From these precepts, a projective exercise of the operationalization of the concept may be anchored in the survey of effort indicators and representative results from each field of power, and directed to the exercise of political influence. Some indicators of operationalization of the concept on the screen may be proposed, associating discussions from the literature on the action of TTs with the transposition of the theoretical framework used. Table 01 shows examples of indicators, associating them to the fields of power and their corresponding results of interest.

Table 01. Indicators of organizational framework in the analytic category of think tanks

| Field of power | Result of interest | Examples of Indicators (Goal-oriented behavior) |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Academia | Credibility | Team of permanent and/or associated researchers having academic credentials Dedication to scientific publication (academic books and articles) Conducting regular academic events Academic editing (indexed scientific journal and/or 'publishing house') Explicit strategy for institutional communication and of expertise |
| Media | Visibility | Explicit strategy for appearing in mass media Own media channels (social media, TV, radio) Lectures, seminars and conferences open to the general public Prospects for opportunities to conduct studies for governments |
| Political | Political Access | Prospects for opportunities to participate in Executive branch hearings and to testify in the Legislature Invite policymakers to events sponsored by the TT Think tankers in the government or politicians in the TT Timely publications on issues being discussed |
| Business | Institutional and financial resources | Diversification of the funding matrix (sources and types) Publishing the amounts received from financiers Transparent governance criteria for institutional and financial resources |

Credibility indicators attest to the existence of a production structure or qualified edition of expertise, also to the importance of academic debate. The structure of knowledge production may count on a team of permanent or associate researchers, which guarantees a cohesive and enduring development production and/or qualified compilation of studies. The value of academic debate is implicit in the engagement in scientific communication publications or in contributions to peer-reviewed works. For the TT to establish its own similar editorial activities (peer-reviewed scientific journal or 'publishing house') is a very evident strategy, in the universe of TTs, for creating instances of academic debate. The promotion of academic events that increase the visibility of the organization and its studies is another indicator of this field for promoting the exchange of knowledge regarding its topics of interest.

The need to disseminate knowledge and gain visibility in debates about the issues that they deal with is also essential for the survival of a think tank. In this sense, developing communication guidelines for the ideas they promote requires an explicit strategy of institutional communication and expertise. Placement in the mass media, especially by press offices, is an indicator of efforts to gain visibility. The use of social media to gain visibility, with the general or a specific public, is also a positive indicator of these efforts and has become a priority in the 'hall' of strategies, given its positive cost/benefit, and reveals the aim of visibility.

Rather than seeking atmospheric and diffuse influence, think tanks have increasingly pursued objective strategies of accessing decisive political actors. To do so, they monitor issues under discussion and deliver reports or depositions with diagnostics and recommendations regarding policies in a timely and opportune manner to take advantage of policy windows. Likewise, the use of opportunities to provide services in the performance of commissioned research enables resources and concomitant political access. At the same time, the construction of relationship networks with governmental policy institutions supports the opening of advising and influence channels. This takes place when think tanks invite policymakers to take part in their events and meetings, or to join the organization. Likewise, when 'think tankers' are part of government groups, they do so in order to have stronger channels of political access.

The indicators of diversification of the matrix of financial resources, which aims to optimize the relative autonomy of think tanks, appear scarcely viable in contexts of low philanthropy and the lower levels of organization of civil society. In these contexts,

in order to survive, TTs undergo financing arrangements that may make them dependent on public resources in a quasi-governmental configuration, resembling for-profit, private consultancies due to the excess of research work; or even, be dedicated to implementing programs and projects similar to non-governmental organizations, deviating from the main activity of a TT. In these contexts, the indicators should be evaluated more as a declared intention, for the purpose of being recognized as think tanks, rather than as concrete reality. This intention can be represented by clear and transparent criteria in the governance of institutional and financial resources, including policies to reject resources that implicate them in conflicts of interest. An indicator to complement the transparency of criteria of resources is the publicizing of the resources received, identifying the source, amount and, ideally, how they were used.

Distinctions with neighboring organizations may be facilitated by the use of these indicators. The dedication to and prioritized engagement with research activities in public policies are the point of differentiation among TTs, interest groups and NGOs, even though they are increasingly using the knowledge base to compete in the "war of ideas". Interest groups speak for a particular electorate and are not concerned with scientific advancement in a field, only that elected leaders pursue policies compatible with their interests (ABELSON, 2009). Non-governmental, social organizations focus on concrete interventions, through projects and programs that aim to ameliorate the problems identified as targets. In the same way that TTs may also be dedicated to interventions (think-and-do-tanks), they are seen as secondary activities. Therefore, indicators that go beyond the presence of researchers, but which extend to competitive insertion and are validated in the field of science, are distinguishing factors. Thus, the differentiation with neighboring organizations by the attribute of engagement in research or compilation of studies is anchored mainly in the priority association of scientific rigor to guide their products beyond their particular interests.

On the other hand, in this aspect, distinctions among TTs, universities and research institutes are vague and may benefit from the observation of indicators in the field of visibility. TTs use strategies of media placement, like key activity, both to influence the political scene and for the capture and maintenance of survival resources, secondary or even non-existent agenda for universities and traditional research institutes. In this regard, the distinction with NGOs, which share the interest in financial independence with TTs, is also clearer because of their search for visibility to support

fundraising focused on the impact of their interventions more than on the ideas that underlie them.

Universities and research institutes are also disengaged from the times, terms and spaces of politics, and, unlike interest groups, the search for political access is not a priority. Interest groups, however, are financed by actors directly interested in the results of the policies they seek to influence, rather than in constructing the debate; they do so by promoting particular interests. In this regard, not only is a diversified funding matrix crucial for the TTs, although challenging in several countries, but also it must be announced as a priority and with transparency. The transparency of criteria and revenues, as well as the diversification of types of sources, is a predilection of any non-governmental organizations dependent on third-party resources if they want to inspire confidence and credibility. This is not necessarily the case with interest groups, especially in countries where there is no regulation of 'lobbying' activity.

Final considerations

The present review essay has discussed, from a review of the specialized literature, how the traditional analytical category of think tanks has been shown to be detached from the reality of the activity of these organizations and, yet, how there is little conceptual dispute in this field of study and much disagreement in the social meaning of the term. For purposes of the field of study, issues regarding the guidelines of the cases and also of inter- and intra-contextual comparability hinder the development of the field. At the same time, socially, TTs are defined according to the convenience of the interests of the different contexts and instances in which they are found.

A promising conceptual proposition is the precepts brought by Medvetz (2012), which seeks to define think tanks by their position in the social structure among fields of power, defining them as a complex and delicate organizational device, coming from approaches and departures with the fields of power that guide them. Establishing these parameters of the four fields of power does not mean reducing the understanding that think tanks operate confined into themselves. This means that the TTs do not fight for space only with interest groups, 'advocacy' organizations and universities, but that these are their principal overlaps in the key area of interest: the political scene. The arrangements and solutions proposed by TTs for survival generate vaguenesses and

overlaps with an entire other set of actors, in other interest spaces, that depend on the context in which they are found. Exactly for this reason, understanding them as a relational and interstitial organizational devices is relevant, as it guarantees in a flexible manner a characterization sensitive to the varying intensity of its attributes, but maintains the center of control of the category, allowing a clearer distinction with neighboring categories.

Given the multidimensional overlaps of the TTs with these different organizations, the use of Bourdieusian conceptions for TTs should be analyzed from the combination of the different types of capital pursued from a perspective of organizational expediences¹⁸. This is because, in the terms adopted here, acting like a think tank presupposes crossing through all these fields of power simultaneously, although composing differentiated configurations of intensity of the use of each expedience for each issue. As stated by Medvetz (2012a), "TTs need to occupy a structural threshold position by assembling and handling various forms of capital acquired from different arenas" (MEDVETZ, 2012b, p. 46).

The discussion of autonomy versus heteronomy, central to the discussion of think tanks by their affiliative nature and largely unresolved in the literature, finds a promising resolution, even if experimental, to approach the framework of the organizations that benefit from this expedience of the reality of the phenomenon. In this sense, we sought to contribute with a reflection about the objective operationalization of Medvetz' concept from a set of indicators, representative of the results of interest of the TTs. The exercise of designing the indicators most relevant to each field of power and associated results may be useful in the crucial identification of essential attributes that enable the conceptual framework. Such a framework already favors exploratory and comparative studies – to understand who they are, how they act and what the differences are among the different uses of the organization expedience of think tanks. The establishment of weights and criteria sensitive to different contexts, however, is an unexplored point of attention and appears as a promising research agenda.

In addition to this, we seek reflections on how the proposed operationalization may help to differentiate think tanks from other organizations with which they overlap,

¹⁸ Medvetz (2012) uses the expression "organizational device" to refer to think tanks as an expedience that is formed when these organizations use the idioms or expediences from the particularly four fields of power (politics, business, media and knowledge production).

by the sharing of organizational expediences. The premise behind this proposal is that, for think tanks, this game is won not only by amassing large amounts of capital but also by establishing the right mixture (MEDVETZ, 2012b, p. 46).

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