Introduction to the *Handbook on Think Tanks in Public Policy*

Donald E. Abelson and Christopher J. Rastrick

In recent years think tanks have struggled to reconcile populist shocks within their polities, faced growing challenges to secure institutional and project funding, and are under greater pressure to establish a more visible presence in the ideas industry, or what some have dubbed the ‘thought-leadership’ arena. In the process, scholars from various academic disciplines have delved into their toolbox to make better sense of what these eclectic and diverse organizations are and do, and the strategies they employ to shape public opinion and public policy. Whilst significant strides have been made in the think tank literature to address these and other questions, fundamental gaps remain. Among the many questions scholars continue to debate is how to develop appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods to better evaluate the extent to which think tanks affect policy change. These and other questions have been fomenting for some years, and scholars and observers of think tanks have rapidly sought to understand these pressures and opportunities as they relate to the operations, ontologies and longevity of think tanks.

The timing and release of this volume comes at a moment when the acute challenges confronting think tanks are being amplified in unprecedented scale and scope. At the time of this volume’s writing the world is grappling with the Covid-19 pandemic, fears and postulations of a global recession, a presidential election in the United States in 2020 which could shape the destiny and character of the country, and indeed the world, for decades, and protests around the globe in response to the painful and disturbing realities of systemic racism and discrimination. At a time of growing anxiety and unrest it is more important than ever that think tanks capable of engaging in reasoned and thoughtful analysis share their ideas and policy recommendations with those entrusted to govern.

Although the pace and reach of these global and structural challenges are significant, this is not the first time think tanks in various regions have faced epochal changes and transformations. Despite a modest median of funding, staffing and media coverage, the case can be made that think tanks represent a resilient form of epistemic organization. Certainly, ebbs and flows of economic performance, ideological popularity and media ownership have challenged the longevity of some think tanks. However, for many of these organizations, these vicissitudes have not generally spelled their demise. Whilst it would be premature to speculate on what legacy these highly volatile and evolving transformations will ultimately bear on think tanks, it is not unreasonable to suggest that think tanks will for the foreseeable future occupy a critical space between the academic and policymaking worlds.

Against this backdrop this volume provides readers with a comprehensive, diverse and what we hope is an insightful introduction to the world of think tanks. In producing this handbook, we have assembled an international group of leading scholars who offer unique perspectives both on the composition and function of think tanks and how they inhabit and interact with other stakeholders in various countries. In doing so, this volume combines the work of scholars and think tank leaders who are well suited and equipped to provide a wraparound analysis of these organizations from multiple vantage points. A volume of this magnitude requires not just a wide breadth of scholarship and insights from think tank leaders who have navigated their institutions through a crowded marketplace of ideas, but also a similar breadth of methodological approaches, geo-institutional fields of vision and perspectives on the normative role and function of these organizations.

In the first part of this volume, authors explore some of the fundamental questions that have shaped and challenged the study of think tanks since the earliest scholarship on these organizations emerged. Despite the insistence of some think tanks that ‘if it matters, measure it’, think tank scholars have, as noted, often struggled with the notion of quantifying the impact, influence or other derivatives of think tank performance. In part, the challenge is reaching a consensus on what constitutes the constituent elements of ‘influence’ or ‘impact’. Admittedly, the concerns scholars face centre on the ability to assign causal value to think tanks as they seek to penetrate the ostensible black box of decision-making at various levels and in different branches of government. Despite these challenges, this has not prevented think tank scholars and observers from attempting to assign quantitative dimensions to the performance and evaluation of think tanks and, perhaps most controversially, the ‘ranking’ of these organizations using defined, though often problematic criteria.

In this part of the volume, Jordan Tchilingirian, Enrique Mendizabal and Jesper Dahl Kelstrup tackle some of these very questions. For Tchilingirian, the exploration of a network approach to the study of think tanks in the UK presents a demonstration of the methodological diversity that think tank scholars can employ in analysing these organizations. This approach has been used extensively in other tributaries of political science, though its application to think tanks has not always been a default methodology for scholars. As such, Tchilingirian’s contribution represents an important empirical demonstration of this phenomenon in a high-density think tank environment. Enrique Mendizabal, familiar to many think tank scholars and observers as the founder of On Think Tanks, poses and tackles critical questions around defining think tanks, acknowledging the incredible diversity of these organizations around the world. From university-based research institutes to institutionalized government-hosted think tanks and independent research organizations, there is no shortage of organizational typologies to describe and classify think tanks.

The ‘boil the ocean’ approach to defining think tanks may lead to a dilution of determining what a think tank is or isn’t. The definitional dilemma that think tank scholars face is not new, and Mendizabal’s contribution offers an important evaluation of the continuing challenges that exist. The final contribution in this part is that of Jesper Dahl Kelstrup who argues that the uncertainty surrounding definitional and

influence challenges (from a methodological standpoint) have not and should not be viewed in the think tank literature as innocuous. In other words, the uncertainty around defining and ‘measuring’ think tanks has in many ways inhibited the ability of scholars to move comparative analyses forward.

The second part of this volume offers readers a unique glimpse into the inner world of think tanks as seen from those who either lead or advise those in leadership positions. This is a much-needed perspective, often overlooked in academic studies of think tanks. First, Madsen Pirie chronicles the evolution of the Adam Smith Institute, from its humble beginnings to an enduring and high-profile think tank in the UK. Similarly, Raymond J. Struyk identifies some of the pressing operational challenges think tanks face, especially in compiling and disseminating research. From protecting the independence of researchers and the integrity of their work from ‘mission creep’ (and creeping costs), this chapter is an important warning and guide for think tank leaders to manage what, for many institutions, is the most important function they perform.

From the other side of the Atlantic, Karlyn Bowman provides a comprehensive overview of the American Enterprise Institution (AEI), one of the most recognizable and distinguished think tanks in Washington, DC. What is particularly interesting about Bowman’s contribution is her insightful and thoughtful analysis of how various presidents at AEI have steered the institution through various stages of the organization’s development. Ultimately this portrayal suggests that, even among the most enduring and affluent think tanks, leadership matters. The final contribution in this part comes from Inderjeet Parmar and Shihui Yin. In their analysis, Parmar and Yin argue that major corporations and foundations in the US and the UK have played a pivotal role in sustaining the work of think tanks over the last 100 years. Among other observations, Parmar and Yin make the case that elite knowledge networks have emboldened certain think tanks and funders to shape disproportionately the narrative and discourse around important policy issues and, ultimately, the direction of the liberal international order.

The challenge in reconciling the desire among scholars to understand the impact of think tanks with the methodological obstacles that still need to be overcome is daunting. However, as the contributors to the third part of this volume illustrate, several advancements have been made. Four scholars seek to explore how think tank performance can be understood. Evert Lindquist begins by examining how think tanks have been enabled and challenged by the digital era, including the competition this has fomented, the implications for consumer delivery and accessibility, and the impact of social media on civil discourse. Of course, all of these developments impact think tanks, and Lindquist provides a substantive analysis of the relevance of the Advocacy Coalition Framework to the study of think tanks. Admittedly, there are many methodological and ontological approaches to the study of think tanks. In her chapter, Diane Stone provides an important analysis of think tanks functioning at the post-national level, acknowledging the rapidly globalizing challenges and opportunities facing the world, and the concomitant challenges and opportunities for think tanks as policy entrepreneurs. Stone makes an important point that the infusion

of think tanks into transnational networks and communities has a legitimating effect on think tanks, whilst also recognizing that the ‘post-factual world’ can limit the role of think tanks as ideational actors in this instance.

Building on the rich methodological discussion, Donald E. Abelson advances an ontological question that has historically challenged think tank scholars, which is to say deducing their ‘influence’ vis-à-vis the ostensible black box of political decision-making. On this matter, Abelson strikes an important balance between positioning think tanks as important contributors to public policy discourse, whilst also acknowledging the limited causal weight scholars can apply to think tanks in the decision-making process. This is not to say, however, that think tanks may or may not actually exert causal impact on policymaking, but rather that the deduction and assertiveness in these kinds of claims ought to be heavily qualified. To this effect, Abelson argues that we must focus more deliberately on the specific target audiences that think tanks seek to impact, from a subject matter, ideological or other standpoint. This is an important position, in that the temptation of think tank scholars and observers may be to over-assert the impact of some of the more higher-profile think tanks in the media cycle, whilst simultaneously under-estimating the impact of more parochial or subject-specific think tanks to policymakers and the public policy discourse. The final chapter in this part, by Dieter Plehwe, takes a close look at how climate change policy has spurred competing interests among this subject-specific think tank community, as well as providing a defence of critical governance studies as a salient methodological underpinning for the study of think tanks’ engagement with their ‘publics’. In particular, Plehwe analyses how the rise of think tanks advocating for more aggressive climate change policies fomented a formidable and effective think tank community on the other end of the spectrum, which is to say climate change denialism or otherwise more sceptical approaches to the environment. This chapter raises interesting questions about the extent to which non-governmental, private sector actors and organizations have leveraged, created and enabled think tanks to advance particular ideological or policy goals, often with considerable material success.

The experience of think tanks varies considerably across different jurisdictions. There are many reasons for this, including the form of government, freedom of the press and news media, not to mention the availability and access to funding for independent research organizations. Not surprisingly, the literature and normative caricature of think tanks is often closely tied to the largest and best funded think tanks ‘inside the Washington, DC Beltway’, but there are large numbers of think tanks that operate far from centres of power in the US. For years, scholars immersed in the study of think tanks have acknowledged that these institutions are not uniquely American. With that in mind, the fourth part of this volume delves deeper into some of the think tanks’ experiences across geographical lines and ultimately provides readers with an empirical appreciation for the causes and consequences of different political and institutional regimes’ interaction with their respective think tank and epistemological communities.

This part begins with an analysis of the role of think tanks in Germany, where Josef Braml and Daniela Schwarzer highlight the importance of think tanks in helping German decision-makers grapple with the re-orientation of the US in the unpredictable world order shaped by President Donald Trump. Braml and Schwarzer also discuss Germany's history in the first half of the twentieth century as being especially constraining to the ability of think tanks in the country to adopt an overly advocacy or ideological disposition. Whilst Germany's think tank community has remained relatively agnostic to post-state developments in the international order, Chinese think tanks are upon the precipice of a novel form of non-governmental research and advocacy. In his contribution, Ling Li suggests that Chinese think tanks are actually forging a critical role within China's national governance framework, fuelled by a participatory ethos that Chinese think tanks have adopted. Li also points to the opportunity for think tanks to weigh in on discussions focusing on social and economic opportunities for China's citizens, as well as the emerging trend among the country's leading policy institutes to influence the direction and content of public policy. In a rare look into the role of think tanks in the Middle East, Nimrod Goren sheds light on the Israeli think tank landscape, underscoring the increasing scale and opportunity for policy-oriented institutions. Goren notes that think tanks in Israel have become more sensitive to inculcating their work with an ideological dimension which, in some instances, has facilitated their access to key channels of political power. Although many Israeli think tanks focus on security- and defence-related issues, some are becoming more immersed in research affecting the country's foreign policy.

In evaluating the think tank landscape in the US, Donald E. Abelson identifies many of the fundamental changes that have taken place in the increasingly crowded American think tank environment. Whereas earlier iterations of the American think tank community were marked by a relatively small number of actors with significant endowments and unfettered jurisdiction over the independent public policy punditry, the proliferation of think tanks in the US has been accompanied by a fundamental ontological realignment of their mission statements towards advocacy as opposed to rigorous, scholastic research. Abelson also points to a fundamental question that has challenged the think tank scholarly community, namely, how to assign or evaluate think tank 'impact'. Whilst there have been case studies of modestly sized think tanks wielding exorbitant 'influence' on policymakers' direction, the challenge of quantifying this impact remains elusive. Julien Landry's analysis north of the US border explores how some of Canada's most notable think tanks have negotiated their position within political and policymaking contexts. He points to the challenging tightrope these organizations walk in reconciling their ideological underpinning with the political imperative of having their voices 'heard' by decision-makers. In other words, Landry argues that think tanks that straddle a politically centrist position can maintain credibility and access within policy circles, whereas those organizations that fall outside that convention can and often do find it difficult to insert themselves into those discussions.

In analysing a significantly underrepresented region in the think tank literature, Adolfo Garcé García y Santos and Camilo López Burian study how think tanks interact with political-knowledge regimes in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. Underscoring the significant growth the think tank community has experienced in these jurisdictions, Garcé García y Santos and López Burian present an important case study on the relationship between the nature of the political regime and the impact on think tank communities. Whilst one can reasonably expect that more authoritarian regimes are less likely to have flourishing think tank communities, the nature of the transition from authoritarianism is also important in determining the evolution of epistemic and think tank communities. Garcé García y Santos and López Burian ultimately conclude that the experience of Brazil and Chile has been one of more welcome integration into policymaking communities, whereas think tanks in Argentina and Uruguay have not benefitted from the same technocratic tradition in the former states.

Continuing the comparative analysis, Christopher J. Rastrick looks at the think tank experience in the US and European Union (EU), with a focus on the policymaking ‘hubs’ within these political systems, namely Washington and Brussels. Whereas American think tanks – and especially those with considerable longevity and funding – have been able to command a prominent stance in the advocacy hierarchy within Washington, DC, think tanks in Brussels have not had a similar scale of profile and advocacy-driven ethos as their American counterparts. In part, this is by design. Building upon Abelson’s chapter in which the advocacy orientation of American think tanks is analysed, Brussels-based think tanks have been able to carve out their niche in a network-oriented role, whereby they successfully congregate policy and policy-proximate actors into collaborative relationships that would otherwise be more difficult to broach through formal channels. The American and European think tank experience is perhaps not surprisingly disparate; nonetheless Heidi Ullrich takes a closer look at the role that Brussels-based think tanks have been able to foment. Ullrich adopts a highly useful ‘waves of development’ model of understanding think tanks’ role in key moments of policy change and how think tanks have been able to capitalize upon the increasing scope of European-level competence from a decision-making standpoint. Ullrich also offers important insights into how think tanks have responded to a significant systemic policy shock – in the wake of the subsovereign debt crisis – that required a diversification of think tanks’ funding and *raisons d’être*.

The final contribution to this part comes from Christopher J. Rastrick, who explores what a research agenda for a post-Brexit European think tank community could look like. The narrative and procedures ultimately leading to the revoked membership of the UK within the EU have certainly been polarized and contested. However, the role for Brussels-based think tanks has not been fully acknowledged in this process. In Rastrick’s contribution a research agenda for scholars of think tanks is outlined, which helps us to better understand how these organizations will respond, with varying aplomb, to the consequential decision of a member state to leave the Union.

The timing of this volume aligns with significant populist ‘shocks’ that are being felt across many jurisdictions, including those whose populist histories are not as storied or enduring as others. As such, the epoch in which this volume is published warrants a thoughtful consideration of how think tanks across multiple jurisdictions are reacting to waves of populism impacting their jurisdictions’ electorate and, by extension, the decision-making norms and apparatus they interact with. In the fifth part of the volume, beginning with the US, Stephen Brooks takes a close look at how that nation’s think tank community – in reaction to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 – is wrestling with the ‘new reality’ that the decision-making process, media institutions and other actors are similarly trying to reconcile. Despite a ‘sky is falling’ narrative that some pundits were quick to assign to the American think tank community, Brooks argues that the rise of populism has not actually presented an ontological or existential threat to American think tanks. In making this argument, Brooks cites the reality that there are actually very few populist think tanks that exist (or populist think tanks of resources and access that exist) and the notion that think tanks and populist political actors may actually be speaking to different audiences with different reward systems.

In continuing the discussion on the impact of President Trump’s impact on the American think tank community, Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn note that the senior staff of President Trump’s foreign policy apparatus represent a significant disconnect from the network of elite policy-planning institutes. Whilst previous foreign policy teams in the White House brought considerable connections and affiliations with transnational policy-planning bodies and foreign policy-oriented think tanks, the current administration has not represented the extent of network overlap compared to previous administrations in the foreign policy community.

In addition to the populist shock that was endemic of President Trump’s election in the US in 2016, a similarly populist upheaval was underway in the UK through the ‘Brexit’ process. In their contribution, Mark Garnett and Virgile Lorenzoni argue that, in fact, the Brexit result did not represent a failure of think tanks, but rather a testament to their value. In short, Garnett and Lorenzoni suggest that UK think tanks did not succumb to the temptation to enter the polarized fray of ‘Leave’ or ‘Stay’ politics, but instead chose to maintain their nuanced policy positions by conveying the multitude of alternatives and middle-ground solutions that could be forged. In fact, even among ideological nodes within the UK think tank community, there was considerable disagreement and divergence on the proposed policy direction the UK should take in the Brexit discussion. Ultimately Garnett and Lorenzoni suggest that the polarized nature of the Brexit debate among the UK populace (as promulgated by the British news media) hollowed out an opportunity for British think tanks to exert a more policy-informed and compromise solution within the rhetoric.

This volume builds on decades of think tank research, whilst identifying and exploring some of the more pronounced and determinative contemporary impacts to think tank structures around the world. Whilst the goal of this volume is not to appraise or portend where think tank communities around the world are headed, it is nonetheless critically important to understand the starting point for these institutions,

the scholarly study thereof and the multiple challenges that continue to underpin their scholarly treatment. This introduction began by recognizing that think tanks have historically been resilient and enduring organizations. The mortality rate among them is low. But it is also true that, in recent months, a convergence of global circumstances has come to pose new and difficult challenges for institutions that are in the business of providing policy recommendations to help government think its way through complex policy problems. There is little doubt that, in the coming years, the global think tank landscape will look different than it does today. There will be economic, social and political challenges that may fundamentally re-orient the priorities of decision-makers and citizens for years to come.

Regardless of how this evolution unfolds, this volume serves as an important reminder of the role think tanks play, and how their efforts to shape the discourse around key policy issues can leave an indelible mark on the body politic. Political and economic upheaval and unrest provide both opportunities and challenges for think tanks to make a difference. The task ahead for those who study think tanks will be to identify and understand how think tanks respond to an ever changing domestic and foreign policy landscape, and if these institutions have the wherewithal to make their voices heard. The insights offered throughout this volume should help readers reach their own conclusions.