

Think Tanks in America

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Gaining Ground

The Rise of the Policy Expert

Those who frequent the borderland between scholarly and ordinary knowledge . . . have a vital stake in blurring the frontier and denying or eliminating what separates scientific analysis from partial objectifications. —Pierre Bourdieu

In 1982, Charles Murray was a 39-year-old independent writer with a background in government program evaluation. “Charles, at the time, was a not-very-well-known social scientist, but his analytical and writing skills impressed us greatly,” says Lawrence J. Mone, president of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, the conservative think tank that hired Murray.¹ Eight years earlier, Murray had completed a PhD in political science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a dissertation titled “Investment and Tithing in Thai Villages: A Behavioral Study of Rural Modernization.” While the topic of the study placed Murray outside the mainstream of his discipline, it nonetheless established a theme that he would return to again and again in his writing: the idea that government bureaucracies do more harm than good, even for their supposed beneficiaries. After finishing graduate school, Murray left the academic world and worked for seven years at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), a private research firm in Washington, DC. “You must understand, I was never attracted to the university track,” Murray says. “I’m temperamentally—I find that the whole faculty world is uncongenial.”²

The job at AIR did not suit him much better. “I would write these research reports,” Murray remembers, “and they were lovingly crafted. And I worked . . . fifty, sixty hour weeks, routinely. But nobody ever read the damn things. You send them in to the sponsor and they’re put on the shelf and nothing ever happens.” Not only was the audience for Murray’s

work small, but the job afforded him little in the way of intellectual freedom: “What you worked on were the things that the government wanted to write contracts for,” he says. Equally disenchanted with, and marginal to, the worlds of government and academic research, Murray soon discovered an occupational niche located structurally in between the two: the growing world of public policy “think tanks.” Murray quit his job at AIR and applied for positions at the Manhattan Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute—three of the top conservative think tanks. Each organization would eventually play a critical role in his success. Heritage vice president Burton Yale Pines received Murray’s job application and became the first sponsor of his developing book project. As Murray recalls, “Burt Pines called me in for an interview. I was talking about the way that social programs that I’d evaluated just hadn’t worked . . . and he gave me, I think, \$2,500 to write a monograph that I spent three months writing. It was entitled *Safety Nets and the Truly Needy*, and that was the forerunner of . . . the book.” Murray then joined the staff of the Manhattan Institute, where he converted the monograph into *Losing Ground*, a sweeping historical account of American social policy that sought to show the pernicious effects of government welfare programs.

Losing Ground’s publication in 1984 was a momentous occasion for the Manhattan Institute, an organization still trying to establish a distinctive identity. (Until 1981, it had been called the International Center for Economic Policy Studies.) The organization launched an aggressive promotional campaign for the book.³ In an internal memorandum, Manhattan president William Hammett wrote that, “Any discretionary funds at our disposal for the next few months will go toward financing Murray’s outreach activities.”⁴ As Murray remembers, Hammett “had about 500 copies sent to the office, and I spent a day inscribing those copies . . . and they were sent out to lots of senior senators and Supreme Court justices and people of that sort.” The organization also sent Murray on a national speaking tour, booked him on numerous radio and television programs, and, with funding from the conservative Scaife and Olin Foundations, convened a two-day symposium that brought together twenty leading welfare reform scholars to discuss the book.⁵ *Losing Ground* quickly became an object of media attention. In Murray’s view, the first important notice was a September 1984 *Newsweek* column by Robert Samuelson. “Bob was one of the ones that was sent a copy. But unlike Supreme Court justices and senators, he actually read the damn thing,” Murray says. “And Bob

Samuelson, when he writes about something, that starts things going.” Samuelson called *Losing Ground* a “well-documented polemic” and concluded, “We cannot reduce poverty simply by being generous. Ultimately, only economic growth and individual effort will suffice.”⁶ A week later, *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry called Murray’s book “thoughtful, well-reasoned and, in many ways, deeply disturbing.”⁷ An echo effect began in the press. For example, in 1986, journalist Nicholas Lemann discussed Murray’s arguments in a two-part *Atlantic Monthly* essay called “The Origins of the Underclass.”⁸ “Once that got started,” Murray says, “you cannot overestimate the degree to which journalists . . . just pick up on whatever else is going on.” In the ensuing years, *Losing Ground* would be profiled, reviewed, and discussed in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles.⁹

Meanwhile, a very different conversation was developing about *Losing Ground* among academic social scientists, who found fault with the book for containing measurement errors and for using data selectively to support its claims. Economists David Ellwood and Mary Jo Bane, for example, tested and found no support for Murray’s finding that welfare benefits caused an increase in single motherhood.¹⁰ Other critics charged Murray with neglecting important macroeconomic changes in his analysis of the poverty rate, overlooking evidence demonstrating the poverty-reducing effects of welfare entitlements, and failing to engage sufficiently with previous research.¹¹ Some also noted that despite *Losing Ground*’s suggestions to the contrary, there had been no considerable rise in antipoverty spending over the previous decade, and that such increases, where they did exist, had gone primarily to the elderly. Summarizing the academic reception, sociologist S. M. Miller wrote in the November 1985 issue of *Contemporary Sociology* that “Murray’s major theses” had been “substantially undermined, as social scientists’ serious reviews have supplanted the puff pieces that first greeted the book.”¹²

Even apart from the negative scholarly reviews, there were signs that *Losing Ground*’s arguments might have little impact outside of conservative intellectual circles. To some observers, the book’s ambitious prescription for ending welfare entitlements to working-age able-bodied citizens—including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, and medical assistance programs—went entirely beyond the political pale.¹³ To make matters worse, the Reagan administration had shown no interest in comprehensive welfare reform as a policy priority. As Murray himself puts it, “The people in the Reagan administration were

actually quite scared of *Losing Ground*. Because, you know, the Reagan administration's line was that the problems were welfare queens who were cheating and you had to stop the cheating. They didn't want to have a radical rethinking of the whole welfare structure. There simply was, in the Reagan administration, zero policy to back it up with." In 1987, sociologist William Julius Wilson summarized the political orthodoxy of the day by suggesting that the "laissez-faire social philosophy represented by Charles Murray is . . . too extreme to be seriously considered by most policymakers."¹⁴

The political winds shifted dramatically over the next several years, however, as conservatives carried on Murray's antiwelfare drumbeat. Murray himself left the Manhattan Institute in 1990 amid controversy surrounding his then-forthcoming book, *The Bell Curve* (cowritten with Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein) and became a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.¹⁵ Three years later, Murray re-entered the welfare debate with a well-timed polemic in the *Wall Street Journal*. The October 1993 column argued that illegitimacy was the engine of social problems such as crime, drugs, poverty, and illiteracy, and that increasing rates of single motherhood among poor and less educated white women would lead to the emergence of a white "underclass."¹⁶ The column touched a nerve. The next month, ABC's David Brinkley devoted a portion of his Sunday morning telecast to the topic, with Murray present as a featured guest.¹⁷ Other media outlets continued the debate. As Murray remembers,

[*NBC Nightly News* anchor] Tom Brokaw was interviewing Bill Clinton the next week and somebody called me and said, "You've got to turn on Tom Brokaw . . .," at which point Clinton said, "Well, Charles and I have had lots of disagreements over the years." You sort of imagine us drinking beer in the college dorm together or something. We had never met. "We've had a lot of disagreements over the years, but I think he's done the country a real service." I was watching the TV and I said, "Holy shit."

Murray, the pundit once considered too conservative by the Reagan administration, was now being cited approvingly by President Clinton as an expert on welfare policy, if not a personal friend. Clinton went on to declare that "[Murray's] analysis is essentially right."¹⁸

The defeat of Clinton's health care plan and the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 further amplified the salience of welfare as a political

issue. Needing a policy achievement with which to appeal to centrist and conservative swing voters in the 1996 elections, Clinton decided to make welfare reform the new centerpiece of his first-term domestic agenda. Over the next two years, culminating in the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Murray's arguments remained a compulsory point of reference in the debate. The legislation captured both the spirit and many of the specific features of his proposals, including work requirements, the elimination of welfare as an entitlement program, and the focus on out-of-wedlock births. Following the law's passage, it became almost de rigueur for fans and critics alike to refer to Murray as having supplied the "intellectual groundwork" for welfare reform.¹⁹ As Murray summarizes, "It took ten years for *Losing Ground* to go from being controversial to conventional wisdom. And by the way, there is very little in *Losing Ground* right now that's not conventional wisdom."

The Rise of Think Tanks in America

Charles Murray's transformation from academic journeyman to guru of welfare reform mirrors another notable success story: the rapid rise of public policy "think tanks," both in the United States and around the world. As we have already seen, three such organizations—the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Manhattan Institute—helped catapult Murray from marginality into the mainstream despite persistent doubts from social scientists about the tenability of his claims. Apart from welfare reform, think tanks have been involved in formulating some of the marquee policy ideas of our time. An early blueprint for the Iraq War, for example, was sketched in the late 1990s by a group of neoconservative foreign policy specialists at the Project for the New American Century. The zero-tolerance policing method known as the "broken windows" approach originated in the Manhattan Institute in the early 1980s before being implemented in New York City and exported to other countries. Likewise, the antievolution theory of intelligent design was born in the Seattle-based Discovery Institute during the 1990s. In other areas as well, such as environmental, tax, and regulatory policies, think tanks have been visible participants in policy debate.²⁰

At a more general level, think tanks have become fixtures of the national policy-making scene by helping to satisfy what the *Washington Post*

once called the “desperate daily need for intellectual meat to feed the hearings, the speeches, [and] the unrelenting policy grinder.”²¹ On Capitol Hill, for example, they supply expert testimony at legislative hearings. In the 24-hour world of cable news, think tank–affiliated “quotemeisters” speak as pundits about the burning issues of the day. Think tanks have also become indispensable to the practice of “politics as a vocation.” Consider, for example, some of the notable roles they have played in the careers of recent American presidents: Ronald Reagan famously distributed copies of the Heritage Foundation’s policy guide *Mandate for Leadership* to his inner circle upon taking office in 1981. A decade later, a young Arkansas politician named Bill Clinton emerged from relative obscurity with substantial help from a think tank called the Progressive Policy Institute, an offshoot of his party’s “New Democrat” movement.²² And if plans for the Iraq War originated in a think tank, then perhaps it was fitting that Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush, considered managing his post–White House reputation in these terms in 2006: “I would like to leave behind a legacy or a think tank, a place for people to talk about freedom and liberty and the de Tocqueville model.”²³ Bush followed through on these plans by forming the George W. Bush Institute in 2011, but he was not the first ex-president to align himself with a think tank: Gerald Ford joined the American Enterprise Institute as a distinguished fellow in 1977, while Jimmy Carter created the Atlanta-based Carter Center in 1982. Finally, even the “candidate for change,” Barack Obama, adhered to what has now become the conventional practice among incoming presidents. After the 2008 elections, Obama selected his transition chief from one think tank, the Center for American Progress, and several of his key staff members from another, the Center for a New American Security.²⁴

This book brings the tools of sociological investigation to bear on the rise of think tanks in the United States. It poses a series of basic questions about their origins, history, and modes of influence. What caused the “veritable explosion” of think tanks in this country over the last four decades?²⁵ What forces shape their intellectual production? Do think tanks have an impact that matches their growing visibility, or has their influence been overstated? If they are influential, then how so? If not, then why has there been such a flurry of activity in this sphere? To put the central question in stark terms: Are think tanks the new machinery for creating policy and bounding public debate in America, or do they operate merely as “window dressing” for a political process that is actually centered elsewhere? To answer these questions, this book reports on a wide-ranging empirical

study that brings together several kinds of data, including historical/archival records, in-depth interviews conducted with representatives from dozens of think tanks (from rank-and-file employees to think tank founders and presidents), firsthand observations carried out in several think tanks, and an original database of the educational and career backgrounds of more than 1,000 think tank-affiliated “policy experts.” (For a detailed overview of the data, see the appendix.)

My central argument is that think tanks, the products of a long-term process of institutional growth and realignment, have become the primary instruments for linking political and intellectual practice in American life. Their proliferation over the last forty years has resulted in the formation of a new institutional subspace located at the crossroads of the academic, political, economic, and media spheres. Like a territorial buffer zone, this *space of think tanks*, as I will call it, has the paradoxical quality of being defined most readily in terms of what it is not, or in terms of its negative relationships with the more established institutions that it helps to separate and delimit. Nonetheless, through their growing interconnectedness, think tanks have collectively developed their own social forms, including their own conventions, norms, and hierarchies, built on a common need for political recognition, funding, and media attention. These needs powerfully limit the think tank’s capacity to challenge the unspoken premises of policy debate, to ask original questions, and to offer policy prescriptions that run counter to the interests of financial donors, politicians, or media institutions. To grasp the importance of think tanks in American life, we must recognize another way in which they are like a buffer zone. As I will argue, the space of think tanks produces its main effects, not with its interior landscape, but with its *structure* or *boundary*. By occupying a crucial point of juncture in between the worlds of political, intellectual, economic, and media production, think tanks increasingly regulate the circulation of knowledge and personnel among these spheres. As a result, any intellectual figure who wishes to take part in American political debate must increasingly orient his or her production to the rules of this hybrid subspace. Thus, my argument in this book is that the growth of think tanks over the last forty years has ultimately undermined the value of independently produced knowledge in the United States by institutionalizing a mode of intellectual practice that relegates its producers to the margins of public and political life.

Before I can elaborate this argument, however, I will need to discuss the three main perspectives from which scholars have previously

examined think tanks. As I will explain in the next section, the first of these approaches grasps think tanks as machinery of ruling class power oriented to the protection of capitalism and the defense of elite interests; the second approach classifies think tanks more open-endedly as instruments in a political setting marked by pluralistic struggle; and the third approach locates think tanks within their wider institutional environments while attempting to uncover their effects at various stages of the political process. I will argue that while each of these perspectives has served as the basis for illuminating studies of think tanks, none of them allows us to grasp what is most distinctive about the rise of think tanks in the United States or elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the gaps and tensions among these theories actually deepen some of the mysteries surrounding the topic. My goal in the next section, then, will be to survey briefly the terrain of existing knowledge about think tanks as a way of clarifying the aims of this study.

Three Views of the Think Tank

The first perspective—derived from the elite theory tradition inaugurated by C. Wright Mills—depicts think tanks as the intellectual machinery of a closed network of corporate, financial, and political elites.²⁶ Mills' followers have argued that think tanks should be analyzed, not as neutral centers of research and analysis, but instead as instruments deployed strategically in the service of a ruling class political agenda. A characteristic expression of this view comes from G. William Domhoff, who argues that, “In concert with the large banks and corporations in the corporate community, the foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups in the policy-planning network provide the organizational basis for the exercise of power on behalf of the owners of all large income-producing properties.”²⁷ On this view, while think tanks may issue reports or policy recommendations that are distinctive for their technicality and seeming rigor, their actual purpose is to assist in the business of “top down policymaking.”²⁸ The elite theory approach is often set against the pluralist perspective, which builds on a longstanding tradition that grasps public policy making as the product of a dynamic interplay among organized interest groups, each with its own resources, strategies, and goals.²⁹ In the pluralist view, think tanks should be analyzed, not as weapons of ruling class power, but as one kind of organization among many in a wide array of societal groups that com-

pete to shape public policy—including labor unions, lobbying firms, social movement organizations, and regional and identity-based associations.

The pluralist and elite theories of think tanks developed together during the 1960s and 1970s in the context of a wider scholarly debate about the nature and distribution of political power in the United States. Having set the terms for much of the early discussion about think tanks, they remain major reference points in the academic literature. Nevertheless, recent scholarship on think tanks has been deeply critical of both perspectives. Most scholars, for example, argue that the language of pure cooptation built into the elite theory perspective is far too mechanical, too functionalist, and too seamless to characterize think tanks adequately. While elite theory may offer a compelling macrostructural view of the networks connecting think tanks to economic, military, and political elites, it is less illuminating when it comes to how these networks actually translate into political influence.³⁰ For example, the elite theorists exhaustively trace specific personnel connections among think tanks—how many trustees of the Council on Foreign Relations sat on various corporate boards, how many went on to serve in high government offices, and so on. And yet across many studies, these scholars have surprisingly little to say about all but the broadest contours of a think tank's activity. Nor, of course, can the elite theory perspective account for the existence of think tanks that orient themselves *against* ruling class interests, or those that lack ties to the rich and powerful. From the point of view of this theory, such organizations are merely “static” in an otherwise elite phenomenon.

The pluralists, for their part, aimed to correct these shortcomings by refusing to assign any essential character or role to think tanks. Yet the extreme openness of their theory also came at a cost, since they could make fewer general claims about think tanks, which then tended to dissolve into the wider sea of interest group struggles. However, if the pluralist approach was in this sense too “open,” then in another sense it was too closed. As scholars such as Steven Lukes have shown of pluralist theory in general, the perspective focuses almost exclusively on decision-making processes carried out in the context of open, visible political struggle.³¹ It pays much less attention to the hidden dimensions of power, such as agenda-setting processes and what the elite theorists called “non-decision making.” When applied to the study of think tanks, this omission becomes a serious error. After all, if the guiding assumption of the pluralist approach is that the relevant target of a think tank's activity is always a specific policy outcome, then think tanks can be described as influential

only to the degree that they directly shape such outcomes. The problem, as other scholars have noted, is that think tanks may have other important effects not captured in a “billiard ball” model of cause and effect. Put differently, even if it is rare to find the “smoking gun” of direct policy influence in the world of think tanks, this is no reason to conclude that they are not influential in other ways. As the elite theorists already pointed out, it may be that think tanks are influential in their ability to create cohesion among political elites or otherwise shape the relations among classes.

These are the standard critiques of the elite and pluralist perspectives, and while I agree with each of them, I would argue that scholars have overlooked what is actually the most glaring problem with the two approaches. The problem becomes apparent, however, only from a vantage point informed by the sociology of intellectuals. Put simply, if we take a step back and consider the wider relationship between the elite theorists and the pluralists themselves, then the debate begins to seem less like a straightforward argument about think tanks per se than a euphemized battle between two sets of intellectuals over their own proper social role. After all, the main thrust of the elite theory perspective was to say that think tanks, and by extension, those who aided and identified with them, were not “truly” intellectuals, but rather servants of power. It was no coincidence, then, that their opponents in the debate (not just the pluralists, but all defenders of American-style liberal democracy) tended to occupy structural positions more proximate to, and sometimes inside of, think tanks. Nelson Polsby, for example, a major pluralist scholar, was a fellow at the Brookings Institution and the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Likewise, Seymour Martin Lipset, who was generally critical of both the Marxist and elite theory traditions, spent the latter part of his career at the Hoover Institution. It should come as no surprise, then, that the pluralists usually adopted a more sanguine view of think tanks, even as they charged the elite theorists with making unverifiable claims about the hidden mechanisms of power.

Of course, these observations alone do not invalidate either theory. However, they do help to underscore the main problem with both approaches. Put simply, despite their differences, both theories built their ultimate conclusions *into their definitions of a think tank*. The pluralists, for example, often used the language of cognitive autonomy to define think tanks, and to differentiate them from non-think tanks. Polsby, for example, distinguished “true” think tanks from mere “public policy research institutes” in the following terms: Whereas “a true think tank obliges its

inhabitants to follow their own intellectual agendas,” those at public policy research institutes “are generally not free to do what they please with their time or to follow their intellectual priorities without constraint.”³² As a definitional tenet, this distinction instantly disables any attempt a scholar might make to determine whether or not “actually existing” think tanks (by which I now mean organizations so named in public debate) truly enjoy cognitive autonomy. Put differently, Polsby’s statement is tautological: either a think tank maintains a certain level of cognitive independence or else it is not “really” a think tank.

The elite theorists avoided this particular tautology, yet so focused were they on the task of revealing that policy making in the United States was not truly a pluralistic struggle that when they examined think tanks, all they could see was a menagerie of intellectual mercenaries and lobbyists-in-disguise. Their tendency, then, was to revert to the opposite view: namely, that any think tank disconnected from the elite machinery of power was therefore somehow a “lesser” think tank and should be relegated to the margins of the discussion.

The overarching point is that both the pluralists and the elite theorists tended to lock themselves into certain categorical judgments about the nature of think tanks, even prior to their empirical investigations as such. More broadly, I would argue, both perspectives became mired in what Gil Eyal and Larissa Buchholz call the “problematic of allegiance” in their approach to intellectuals.³³ By this phrase, Eyal and Buchholz mean a mode of analysis centered on the question of an intellectual’s ultimate loyalties or commitments. In the classical sociology of intellectuals, for example, the prototype of the intellectual was the “engaged man of letters” marked by his allegiance to the ideals of truth and justice (as exemplified by Émile Zola of the Dreyfus Affair).³⁴ The main problem with thinking about intellectuals in this way, as Eyal and Buchholz show, is that it tends to draw scholars into the very struggles over intellectual authority that their work ostensibly aims to describe from an impartial point of view. Consequently, even seemingly neutral academic debates on questions of intellectual loyalty quickly become forms of *boundary work*, or strategic attempts by intellectuals to establish where the “true” dividing line is between intellectuals and nonintellectuals.³⁵ An argument about the so-called “demise of the intellectual,” for example (a common trope in the classical sociology of intellectuals), can also be read as an attempt to undermine or discredit efforts made by other intellectuals to lay claim to the title itself. To remedy the problem, Eyal and Buchholz recommend shifting the sociology of

intellectuals toward the study of “how forms of expertise can acquire value as public interventions.”³⁶

The purpose of this seeming digression into the sociology of intellectuals is to suggest that the “problematic of allegiance” was projected into the early scholarly debate on think tanks. Whereas the elite theorists were concerned mainly with showing that think tanks were not truly organs of intellectual production, the pluralists were inclined to defend them. Doubtless both sides would disagree with my characterization and insist that their theories managed to transcend their social moorings. Yet their best defense would be to point out that their ultimate concerns lay, not in the development of a theory of think tanks per se, but in a more general attempt to theorize American politics, for which think tanks were only empirical anchors. And yet this defense would unwittingly underscore my central point, albeit in a different sense, since it would show that neither theory was especially well suited to capturing what was distinctive about think tanks. As Abelson puts it, the pluralists typically portrayed think tanks as “one voice among many” in the political sphere, while the elite theorists sought to show that the same organizations were nodes in an elite policy-planning network.³⁷ On the other hand, if our aim is to understand think tanks without subsuming them into a pre-devised theory of politics, then neither approach has much to offer.

A two-pronged methodological lesson follows from this discussion. The first prong is that we should be careful not to smuggle into the analysis any essentialist conclusions about a think tank’s ultimate political or intellectual proclivities. Instead, we should adopt a more flexible theoretical approach that allows us to investigate the properties and purposes of think tanks as empirical questions. The second prong, which might initially seem to be at odds with the first, is that we cannot excuse ourselves from the task of clarifying what we mean by the term *think tank*. Analytically prior to the question of what think tanks do, after all, is the question of what they *are*—and neither of the first two approaches offers a compelling answer. Here, then, is the first challenge of this book: How can we define the study’s subject matter clearly without also prejudging it?

With this question in mind, let me turn now to the third, and chronologically the most recent, of the three perspectives that scholars have used to examine think tanks. I am referring to the family of approaches that fall under the heading of institutionalism, which focus on the structural environments in which think tanks are embedded, the rules and norms that shape their behavior, and the organizational arrangements and pro-

cesses to which they must respond. Does institutional theory offer a set of useful tools for analyzing think tanks? More specifically, does it overcome the limitations of the pluralist and elite theory perspectives? With respect to the first problem mentioned above—that of prejudging think tanks—I believe the benefits of an institutionalist framework are obvious. The approach does not lock us into a tautological argument about what a think tank does. Nor does it force us to draw any advance conclusions about a think tank’s political or intellectual propensities. Instead, the working premise of an institutionalist approach is that think tanks comprise a heterogeneous array of organizations with a wide range of possible effects. As Abelson puts it, scholars operating in this tradition attempt to describe how think tanks “shape the political agenda, contribute to policy formation, and assist in policy implementation.”³⁸ I would also point out that, when it comes to describing the think tank–affiliated actors commonly known as “policy experts,” the institutionalist framework seems to offer an escape from the problematic of allegiance that hampered the classical sociology of intellectuals.* On this point, the main contribution comes from the subset of institutionalist studies focused on *epistemic communities*, or networks of politically engaged experts and professionals who share certain basic cognitive frames and assumptions.³⁹ By depicting think tank–affiliated policy experts as members of an epistemic community, institutionalist scholars free themselves from having to weigh in on the futile debate over whether or not these actors are “truly” intellectuals. Instead, they can shift their focus to the structure, reach, and function of the networks in which policy experts are embedded.

Given these advantages, it might seem as if an institutionalist approach represents the perfect antidote to the shortcomings of the pluralist and elite theories. Yet I would disagree. In fact, I would argue that the solutions it offers to the problems sketched above are partial at best. Consider first the question of a think tank’s potential influence. The chief merit of the institutionalist framework, as I noted, is that it widens the analytic net to capture the effects of think tanks at every stage of the policy process.

* For stylistic purposes, I will omit the quotation marks around the phrase “policy expert” from this point forward. However, as I will elaborate below, I use the term in an emic sense to refer to a *political folk category* whose history and meaning must be examined empirically. Moreover, my central point about the term will be that it offers a selective—indeed misleading—description of think tank–affiliated actors by highlighting only a particular dimension of their activity (namely, that which involves the use of knowledge and technical proficiency).

Yet even this expanded focus, I would argue, remains too narrow, as a simple rhetorical question illustrates: Given the tremendous uncertainty surrounding think tanks, why should we assume that their effects are focused entirely, or even *primarily*, within the sphere of official politics? One of the central arguments of this book, in fact, will be that the impact of think tanks extends well beyond the political sphere into other social settings. Situated at the crossroads of the academic, political, business, and media spheres, think tanks have generated effects in each setting.

For example, as suppliers of media sound bites, facts and figures, and opinion pieces, they have been major participants in what Ronald Jacobs and Eleanor Townsley call “the rise of organized punditry.”⁴⁰ Think tanks have also exercised a degree of influence in academic circles by serving as models for university-based policy institutes and employers of public policy school graduates—the growth of which over the last half-century coincides historically with the proliferation of think tanks. Moreover, think tanks have generated effects in the world of business by supplying vehicles through which corporations and wealthy individuals can intervene in political affairs, often without the unwanted visibility that accompanies more direct forms of political intervention. In this way, think tanks have expanded the strategic repertoires of market actors in American politics, especially the members of the “business-activist” movement that has played a leading role in the promotion of promarket ideology since the 1960s.⁴¹ To summarize these effects, I would argue that it is at the macrostructural level, or in the articulation of the spheres of politics, the media, business, and academia, that we must look for the main effects of think tanks.

I am also not convinced by the institutionalist solution to the problem of how to depict think tank–affiliated actors. While the concept *epistemic community* certainly moves beyond the problematic of allegiance as described above, it is still limiting as an analytic tool. After all, in the international relations literature from which the concept derives, the term refers to a network of policy-oriented actors whose members share a certain brand of expertise, such as legal or scientific knowledge. (In a widely cited article, Peter M. Haas defines *epistemic community* as “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area.”⁴²) But when applied to the world of think tanks, this idea tends to conceal as much as it illuminates. In the first place, think tank–affiliated actors are not obviously engaged in a coherent profession-

alization project, being equipped with different resources, credentials, and forms of expertise.

An institutionalist scholar might reply that multiple epistemic communities therefore coexist within the world of think tanks. But this only pushes the operative question to a different level: Why should we assume that think tank–affiliated actors are first and foremost “experts”? As I will argue, credentialed knowledge is only one of several resources that policy experts must deploy in order to succeed, even on their own terms. Other socially valued resources circulating in the space of think tanks include network ties to political elites and journalists, media savvy, the ability to raise money, and specialized political skills. Crucially, then, it is the *relative values* of these resources that remains the central unanswered question about the role of policy experts. For example, does the ability to raise money trump academic achievement in the space of think tanks, or is being “good on television” sufficient to compensate for a lack of relevant knowledge about a given policy issue? Furthermore, what counts as “relevant” knowledge? These are not questions with simple answers, nor can they be treated as entirely settled within the world of think tanks. Instead, they are also *stakes* in an ongoing competition among policy experts, who inevitably arrive at the think tank endowed with different resources, forms of expertise, and credentials.

Together these observations point to what I believe is actually the most glaring problem with the institutionalist framework. Like its predecessors, this approach offers no analytic concept of a think tank, no adequate sense of the *distinctive social or organizational forms* denoted by the term. Whereas scholars operating in the elite theory tradition reduced think tanks to appendages of the “policy-planning network,” the pluralists vacillated between the idea that think tanks were havens for freethinking intellectuals and the notion that they could be subsumed analytically into the vast sea of interest groups. The institutionalist approach usefully shifts our focus to the rules and constraints within which think tanks are embedded and the personnel networks they coordinate, albeit without clearly elucidating what a think tank is. To be sure, most scholars working in this tradition have taken care to formulate operational definitions of the term *think tank*, some of which I will discuss in the next chapter. Yet, as I will argue, these definitions are theoretically problematic because they inevitably rest on the arbitrary premise that “true” think tanks are marked by formal independence from bureaucratic, party, market, academic, and media institutions. As I will show, there are good reasons to discard this

assumption altogether, since in certain ways think tanks are also highly *dependent* on these same institutions for their existence. Let me close this section, then, by noting what is undoubtedly the central irony in the study of think tanks. Despite decades of research on the topic, no one has yet offered a satisfying answer to the most basic question of all: *What is a think tank?*

Plan of the Book

Chapter 1 will address this question at length. The approach I will take is derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and recent extensions of his theory by scholars such as Gil Eyal and Loïc Wacquant. It rests on a seeming paradox: To clarify the status of the ambiguous creatures known as think tanks, we will need to build the *structural blurriness* of the object into our conceptualization itself. However, it is not the mere fact of blurriness that distinguishes think tanks from other organizations, since many social institutions exhibit this characteristic. Rather, it is the particular brand of blurriness exhibited by think tanks that holds the key to their identity. My argument will be that think tanks are best understood, not as a discrete class of organizations per se, but as a fuzzy network of organizations, themselves divided by the opposing logics of academic, political, economic, and media production. It is this series of oppositions that drives the interior dynamics of the space of think tanks. We can overcome any challenge posed by the fuzziness of think tanks by historicizing the organizational network in which they are embedded—that is, by documenting its formation and determining how its members have marked themselves off from more established institutions. Built into a think tank’s practical repertoire, I will argue, is an elaborate symbolic balancing act that involves gathering multiple institutionalized resources from neighboring social spheres, including samplings of academic, political, economic, social, and media capital.

Chapter 2 will proceed with the task of historicizing the space of think tanks by relating the long “prehistory” of think tanks to a transformation in what Bourdieu calls the *field of power*, or the system of struggles in which holders of various institutionalized resources “vie to impose the supremacy of the particular kind of power they wield.”⁴³ Focusing on the period from the 1890s to the early 1960s, I will argue that the forerunners of American think tanks emerged in the context of a precarious encounter

among elites, including politically moderate capitalists, aspiring bureaucrats and diplomats, and the members of an emerging intelligentsia. At one level, this process can be read (just as the elite theorists would suggest) as a strategic collaboration among different segments of the “ruling class.” However, at another level, the same process must be understood as part of a *struggle interior to the upper class* over the relative values of their different resources or media of power. To their progressive capitalist cofounders, for example, the forerunners of the think tank were useful, both as tools for brokering compromises with organized labor and for resisting the expansion of the New Deal. More broadly, the same organizations were part of a wider effort by capitalists to “become modern” by harnessing the tools of science and rationality for their own ends. On the other hand, for the aspiring diplomats, foreign policy specialists, and social scientists, the forerunners of the think tank were significant mainly as vehicles of professionalization.

The result of this ambivalent encounter among elites was the formation of a large, segmented machinery of “technoscientific reason” that filled the gap left by the absence of an official government technocracy in the United States. Chapter 3 will use this claim as a point of departure for an analysis of the formation of the space of think tanks starting in the 1960s. To understand how a diffuse set of organizations became oriented to one another in their judgments and practices, I will situate this process in the context of a wider struggle among groups with different claims to politically relevant knowledge. As scholars such as Eyal have argued, the 1960s was a decade of “intense and undecided conflict over the prototype of intellectual work,” both in the United States and in other countries around the world.⁴⁴ In the United States, I will argue, this conflict took the form of a series of challenges to the technocratic specialists who had become the leading suppliers of policy advice during the first half of the twentieth century. The main such challenge, I will argue, was issued by an emergent group of conservative “activist-experts” who sought to undermine the power of technocrats from a standpoint of greater intellectual openness and public engagement in what Eyal calls the “field of expertise.” As the activist-experts gained influence, however, their struggles with the technocrats gave rise to a convergence between the two groups. The main result of this process was the formation of a new subspace of knowledge production with its own orthodoxies, conventions, and interior dynamics. As the technocrats and activist-experts drew closer together and became more interconnected, they gradually settled on common norms and criteria of

intellectual judgment distinct from those of academia. It was through this process, I will argue, that think tanks collectively acquired an identity of their own.

Having traced the formation of the space of think tanks historically, I will turn to an analysis of its present day form and functioning. Chapter 4 will develop both a structuralist mapping, or a *social topology*, of the space of think tanks and a general theory of “policy research” as a loosely coordinated system of intellectual practices. The chapter will begin by examining the external forces and determinations that are brought to bear on think tanks. To succeed in their complex missions, I will argue, think tanks must carry out a delicate balancing act that involves signaling their cognitive autonomy to a general audience while at the same time signaling their *heteronomy*—or willingness to subordinate their production to the demands of clients—to a more restricted audience. To reconcile this opposition, think tanks gather a combination of resources from the “parent” fields of academia, politics, the market, and the media, and assemble these into novel packages. To function stably, think tanks depend on a set of social agents who subscribe to the ethos of policy research. Turning then from structure to agency, chapter 4 will examine what I call the “occupational psyche” of the policy expert, or the antithetical combination of drives, perceptions, habits, and reflexes needed to excel in the world of think tanks. The most successful policy experts, I will argue, are those who blend styles, skills, and sensibilities that mirror the structural oppositions among the fields on which think tanks depend for their resources and recognition.

By depicting think tanks as inhabitants of an *interstitial field*, we can arrive at a better understanding of both the considerable differences among think tanks and the unifying forces that draw them together in the practice of policy research. But how should we understand the distinctiveness of policy research as a form of intellectual practice? In one sense, it is tempting to describe the work of a think tank using a language of pure constraint—the think tank’s dependence on clients being the main factor that prevents it from questioning the basic orthodoxies of policy debate or posing its studies against the interests of donors, politicians, or journalists. However, I will argue that the same conditions that undermine the cognitive freedom of think tanks also operate as curious sources of flexibility and *power*. The nature of this power must be understood largely in terms of its reconfiguring effects within the wider space of knowledge production in the United States. By claiming for themselves a central role

in policy debate, think tanks effectively limit the range of options available to more autonomous American intellectuals, whose products become increasingly dispensable in political and media fields dominated by moneyed interests and political specialists. The main conclusion of chapter 4, then, is that think tanks produce their most important effects, not in spite of, but precisely through their “blurriness.” It is this quality, I argue, that enables them to suspend conventional questions of identity and carry out practices not possible in any of their parent fields.

A brief thought experiment can help to illustrate these points and bring this introductory discussion full circle. How would we identify the source of Charles Murray’s efficacy in the welfare reform debate of the 1990s as described in the opening vignette? In the classical sociology of intellectuals, the standard approach would have been to classify Murray using some typology of intellectual role-sets. We would be forced to decide, for example, whether Murray most closely resembled a noble “public intellectual,” an aloof “ivory tower” figure, a servile “technician,” or some other ideal-type. However, I believe we should be wary of this approach, not least because existing attempts to classify Murray in this way typically end up saying more about the *classifier* than about the presumed object of classification. To label Murray an “exemplary social scientist” (as American Enterprise Institute president Christopher DeMuth did while bestowing on him the Irving Kristol Award in 2009), for example, or to call him a “conservative evildoer” or a producer of “racist pseudo-science” (as progressive journalist and Center for American Progress fellow Eric Alterman did in his book *What Liberal Media?*) is to locate *oneself* in the system of political and intellectual struggles that one is attempting to analyze.⁴⁵ Murray himself, however, remains strangely untouched by these descriptions.

A better approach, I believe, is to recognize that Murray’s successful intervention in the welfare debate of the 1980s and 1990s depended not on his ability to embody a particular intellectual type but rather on his ability to exist “in between” types by merging disparate skills and switching roles as the situation demanded. As the opening vignette illustrated, Murray first entered the welfare debate with all of the outward appearances of a “public intellectual,” or someone who could challenge the political orthodoxy of the day from a standpoint of relative autonomy while speaking in terms that were accessible to the lay public. However, he also gained a degree of authority from the appearance of technical proficiency that came from his experience as a former government policy analyst.

Once the Republicans took control of Congress, however, Murray subtly repositioned himself as a crusader and spokesman for the antiwelfare movement by testifying on Capitol Hill and serving on an official White House–sponsored commission to move the legislation forward. We can even find a hint of “ivory tower” scholasticism in Murray’s story, although the site of his privileged seclusion was not a university. As Murray himself says in an interview, “In the think tank world . . . I have—and this is not really an exaggeration—I have essentially spent the last twenty-one years doing exactly as I pleased, every day and all day.”⁴⁶

Chapter 5 will put the general theory of think tanks developed in the book into action by examining the history of struggles over poverty and welfare policy in the United States from the late 1950s to the passage of the 1996 welfare reform legislation. I will argue that the formation of the space of think tanks during this period was one of the main institutional processes leading to the discursive shift from a problematic of *deprivation*—or a policy debate centered briefly on mass poverty and its structural underpinnings—to a problematic of *dependency* that identified welfare receipt itself as a form of moral degeneracy and a source of social ills. By transforming the institutional structures of knowledge production and consumption in the United States, the growth of think tanks made possible a shift in the cognitive framework within which policy makers worked to achieve policy solutions in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In describing the history and present day role of think tanks, I would like this book to contribute to a wider discussion about the “time-honored question of the relationship between social knowledge and public action.”⁴⁷ With this aim in mind, the concluding chapter will relate the study of think tanks to three ongoing debates connected to this question. The first requires us to consider think tanks in what will surely seem like a paradoxical and unfamiliar context: namely as heirs to the long and deep-seated *anti-intellectual* tradition that commentators since Alexis de Tocqueville have identified as part of the national culture. Resituating the topic within a framework centered on the relations among intellectual groups, I will argue that the charge of anti-intellectualism is best understood as a strategic stance or “position-taking” in the intellectual field—one that typically involves an attempt by a relatively autonomous intellectual group to discredit its less autonomous counterparts. Focusing our attention on the struggles among intellectual groups will point the way toward a clearer understanding of the circumstances under which think tanks are likely to be regarded as organs of intellectualism or anti-intellectualism.

The second debate I will address concerns the status of the so-called “public intellectual.” At one level, the lively debate on this topic engendered by Russell Jacoby’s 1987 book, *The Last Intellectuals*, might seem to offer a natural starting point for the study of think tanks. After all, in the standard narrative associated with Jacoby, the putative demise of the public intellectual takes place concurrently with the rise of think tanks, suggesting the possibility of a causal linkage. But at another level, the debate on public intellectuals only promises to hinder our understanding of think tanks. Having become predictably mired in confusion over the meaning of the central concept, the debate on public intellectuals has generated more heat than light. In keeping with the relational approach of this study, I will argue, first, that the term *public intellectual* is best understood as referring, not to a flesh-and-blood actor per se, but to a specific position in a space of relations among actors with claims to knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, while the germ of a public intellectual project may have incubated briefly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was quickly snuffed out. And yet the main process leading to its failure has been largely overlooked by scholars. Thus, against the prevailing wisdom, I will argue that the recent historical period has been marked neither by the demise of the public intellectual, as some writers have claimed, nor by the opposite process, that is, by a simple growth in the public role of intellectuals, as others have argued. Instead, the proliferation of think tanks has made possible a new kind of public figure in American life known as a “policy expert,” whose authority is built on a claim to mediate an encounter among holders of various forms of power.

The last discussion with which I will engage in chapter 6 is the ongoing debate in academic sociology about the prospects for, and the desirability of, a civically engaged “public sociology.” Initiated in 2004 by sociologist Michael Burawoy, this discussion has generated a spirited conversation about the soul and direction of the sociological discipline. However, I will argue that the debate, being framed largely in terms of the relations between sociologists and their “publics” and among sociologists themselves, has generally failed to take into account the place of sociology within the wider American intellectual field. In particular, writings on public sociology have largely overlooked what I will argue is the chief obstacle to civic-sociological engagement in the United States: namely, the rise of heteronomous knowledge producers in the space of public debate since the 1960s. Relating public sociology to the rise of think tanks will provide a useful starting point for a theory of the institutional conditions under which sociological knowledge is produced, consumed, and (most often)

ignored in American public debate. By issuing policy prescriptions tailored to the preferences of sponsors and consumers (especially politicians and journalists), think tanks tend to relegate the most autonomous sociologists to the margins of policy debate and draw others toward a more technocratic style of political-intellectual engagement.