
The Development and Significance of Think Tanks in Germany

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Abstract

This paper focuses in its first part on the different types of German think tanks and their organizational ingredients by looking at issues such as think tank management, funding, staffing and strategies. The second part examines the role of German think tanks in policy development and expert engagement and considers the constraints and opportunities, which both restrict and enable them to perform and to fulfill their potential.

Introduction

Think Tanks are players in an increasingly diverse world of policy advise-giving organizations and political consultancies, which has emerged in Germany during the past two decades. This article uses the term ‘think tank’ in its broadest sense - that is, non-profit private and public organizations devoted to examining and analyzing policy-relevant issues, and producing research outputs in terms of publications, reports, lectures, and workshops, in most cases targeted to identifiable audiences with the hope of

influencing decision-making and public opinion¹. The article tries to combine the approaches of the two “schools” of think tank research in contemporary social science (see Stone 2004: 1-2): the first approach and henceforth the first part of this article focuses on the different types of German think tanks and their organizational ingredients by looking at issues such as think tank management, funding, staffing and strategies. The second “school” and the second part of the paper cut to the central issue of the policy influence and the political impact of think tanks in Germany.

The German Think Tank Sector: An Organizational Overview

The German think tank sector is characterized by a large number of organizations and researchers, scattered across the country. Estimates of the number of think tanks operating in Germany vary, ranging between 70 and 100 institutions (see Day 2000). If one broadens the definition to also include various church-sponsored academies (which sometimes serve as part-time think tanks), operating foundations or university research centres, the number may even exceed 100².

More than half of the German policy research institutes were founded in the last quarter of the 20th century, although a large proportion of the largest and best-funded think tanks date from pre-1975. Compared to other countries – especially to the United States and Britain – the percentage of publicly financed think tanks is very high, and ranges around 75%. There are about a

¹ One-day strategy sessions of corporations, small firms or associations etc., for which the term “think tank” is increasingly being used, are excluded from this definition as well as single-issue temporary commissions or task forces.

² The empirical base of this study are approx. 130 think tanks currently listed in the “Think Tank Directory Deutschland” (<http://www.thinktankdirectory.org>) for its empirical base.

dozen large non-university institutes that have annual budgets of Euro\$ 5 to \$ 14 million and employ between thirty and eighty research staff. With the exception of a very few private operating foundations such as the Bertelsmann Foundation, these larger institutes receive funding from the federal government or the Länder, joint funding from both levels of government as well as from research bodies such as the Max Planck Society or the Fraunhofer Society. Contract research is an important funding source for 45% of German think tanks, but it is difficult to separate contract research institutes from academic think tanks. The important role of state governments as sponsors and financiers of think tanks reflects Germany's federal structure.

Typology of German Think Tanks

By and large, the German think tank landscape fits into the mould of international think tank typologies (Weaver and McGann 2000), although the sector of private and advocacy-oriented policy research institutes is less developed than in Anglo-American countries. It is also sometimes hard to distinguish between research-oriented academic think tanks on the one hand and institutions of basic research touching on policy-relevant questions on the other. It has proven quite difficult, if not impossible for members of this diverse group of think tanks to recognize that they may belong to a clearly identifiable community. Table 1 provides a breakdown of think tank types in Germany.

Table

1

Types of think tanks in Germany (as percentage of 93 think tanks)

Academic Think Tanks	75 %
Advocacy Institutes	20 %
Party Think Tanks	5 %

Generally speaking, German think tanks are post-World War II creations. Less than 10% of German think tanks date back to the Weimar Republic or even to Imperial Germany. Four of the six large economic research institutes, the HWWA Hamburg (1908), the Kiel Institute of World Economics (IfW) (1914) and the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin (DIW) (1925) as well as its western branch, the Essen-based Rhine-Westphalia Institute for Economic Research (RWI) (1926) were post-war relaunches of previously existing institutes. A few other bodies, the Economic and Social Science Institute (WSI) of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) or the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, close to the Social Democratic Party and named after the first president of the Weimar Republic, had forerunner institutes prior to the Nazi period. 40% of today's think tanks were founded between 1945 and 1975, nearly 50% were founded over the past 30 years since 1975.

Academic Think Tanks

Academic think tanks are by far the largest group of think tanks in Germany. This group can be divided into the following sub-groups:

Created by government, but working independently within public sector guidelines.

Non-university institutes (mostly Leibniz-Society Institutes)

University-affiliated centers of applied policy-relevant research

Academic think tanks with considerable private funding.

Government created institutes: The federal government created several ministerial think tanks (Ressortforschungseinrichtungen) and a number of quasi-independent institutes of which the SWP – German Institute for International Affairs and Security is by far the largest. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, state governments became important sponsors of academic think tanks – particularly in the fields of peace and conflict research, environment and technology and economic research.

Leibniz - Institutes: The largest group of academic think tanks are the so-called "Leibniz-institutes³. Among this diverse group of more than 50 non-university research institutes, most of which receive joint financial assistance from the federal government and the states on a fifty-fifty basis, about a dozen institutes undertake applied policy

³ In 1975, the Federal Government and the Länder enlarged the Framework Agreement on the Promotion of Research to include independent research institutions of supra-regional importance and national scientific interest, and institutions performing service functions. Those qualifying for this financial assistance were listed in an implementing agreement in 1977 that was printed on blue paper. Hence the name Blue List, which was renamed Wissenschaftsgemeinschaft Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz at the end of the 1990s.

research. The most visible institutes among this group are six large economic research institutes with a combined staff of more than 400 economic researchers. The joint funding of these economic think tanks through the national and state governments not only reflects Germany's federal structure, but also expresses the desire to encourage competing views on economic policy and on Germany's economic development. Twice annually, experts of these six economic research institutes issue a Common Report predicting the short- and medium-term performance of the German economy. The six expert institutes are meant to arrive at joint conclusions, but the opportunity to express dissenting views in the form of minority opinions is given. The Common Report receives the attention of the media as well as of the government, the Bundesbank, interest groups, and other actors in the economic policy community. It influences public debate about the legitimacy of government economic policy more than it influences policy decisions.

Other Leibniz-Society institutes that conduct policy relevant research include the Science Center Berlin for Social Research (WZB), which was founded in 1969 at the supra-partisan initiative of federal members of parliament and was inspired by the Brookings Institution in Washington D.C., and the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), an umbrella organization that incorporates a group of Hamburg-based area-studies institutes with an expertise on Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Most member-institutes of other scientific associations such as the Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science, are too devoted to long-term, basic research to be regarded as policy-oriented think tanks. Among the notable exceptions are individual researchers and research units at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, at the Center for European Economic Research in Mannheim, or at the Fraunhofer-Institute for Systems and Innovation Research (ISI) in Karlsruhe.

University affiliated think tanks: Many German think tanks are affiliated with universities or operate in a semi-academic environment. With a staff of more than 50 researchers the Center for Applied Policy Research (C.A.P.) at the University of Munich is one of the largest institutes of its kind. C.A.P. is somewhat unusual for a university-based research institute as it draws a substantial amount of its core funding from governmental (European Union) and from private sources (e.g. the German Marshall Fund and the Bertelsmann Foundation). In other cases, it is not easy to draw a line between academic research and policy-oriented work. Notable additions to the field of university-affiliated academic think tanks are the Institute for Development and Peace at the University of Duisburg - inspired by the Worldwatch Institute, the Munich-based Center for Economic Studies (CES), which operates as the academic arm of the IFO-Institute, the Center for European Integration Research (ZEI) and the Center for Development Research (ZEF) in Bonn. Founded in the mid 1990s, the latter two academic think tanks received substantial government grants to compensate Bonn for the loss of its status as Germany's capital.

Privately financed academic institutes: There are at least two major exceptions to the rule of government-created and publicly financed academic think tanks in Germany. One is the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) modeled as an elite network-cum research institute on the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. The second major exception is the Bertelsmann Foundation (BF), which was founded in 1977 at the seat of its parent corporation Bertelsmann AG in Gütersloh. Ever since the 1990s Bertelsmann Foundation and some of its subsidiaries like the Center for Higher Education Research (CHE) emerged as heavyweight players in privately funded policy research with resources matching or exceeding those of the largest

government- funded institutes.

Finally, while having a more limited research capacity than the Bertelsmann Foundation, a growing number of other corporate foundations are becoming catalysts for policy-relevant ideas by organizing and sponsoring dialogue activities that bring together experts and practitioners. This group includes bodies such as the Deutsche Bank Forum Think Tank Alfred Herrhausen Society for International Dialogue Foundation – run by the former director of the Chancellery Planning Unit Wolfgang Nowak, the Hertie Foundation, the Koerber-Foundation, the Herberrrt Quandt-Foundation, and academies like Burda Academy of the Third Millennium, as well as Protestant and Catholic academies. In addition, international think tanks and branches of American think tanks have expanded their activities or set up shop in Berlin: among them are the Aspen-Institute, the American Academy or the Berlin-office of RAND-Europe. In terms of classification some of the aforementioned private think tanks and institutes are clearly "borderline cases", as their public visibility and corporate backing makes the crossovers between academic think tanks and the second category, advocacy institutes.

Advocacy Think Tanks

While most academic think tanks usually emphasize their non-partisanship in terms of party and interest group politics, advocacy think tanks are explicitly engaged in supporting certain political causes or interests in society. This type of think tanks includes (a) interest group-based think tanks, (b) the research academies of the political foundations associated with the political parties, as well as (c) institutes independent of parties and organized interests.

(a) Interest group-based policy research organizations

affiliated with the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, the Protestant and Catholic Churches, or certain single-issue interest groups (such as the Taxpayer's Union) are among the oldest think tanks in Germany, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. The WSI (Institute of Social and Economic Research in the Hans-Böckler Foundation), think-tank to the trade union federation DGB, became an important training pool for future academics and political activists. The Federation of German Industry expanded its own research unit Institute of German Industry-Cologne, Germany's largest privately funded economic research institute.

(b) The second distinct group of advocacy think tanks is the party-affiliated think tank, or 'political foundations', as they prefer to be called. These organizations are more prominent and better funded in Germany than nearly anywhere else. The semi-official status of political parties in the Basic Law (Article 21) and the desire not to channel various educational, research-oriented and international activities directly through the party system, but also not to keep them outside the influence of political parties, has resulted in a huge – albeit shrinking - amount of public funds (approximately Euro \$400 million in 2000) flowing into political foundations. Today there are six such foundations (see table 2), each of which is related to one of the parties represented in the Bundestag.

Table 2: German Political Foundations

Political Foundation	Date Established	Party
Friedrich-Ebert Foundation Party (SPD)	1925	Social Democratic
Konrad-Adenauer Foundation Part (CDU)	1964	Christian Democratic
Hanns-Seidel-Foundation (Bavaria) (CSU)	1967	Christian Social Union
Friedrich-Naumann Foundation (FDP)	1958	Free Democratic Party
Heinrich-Boell-Foundation	1996	Bündis90/The Greens
Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation Socialism (PDS)	1998	Party of Democratic

It is difficult to distinguish potential think-tank-functions from the other activities of party foundations which are international activities, political training and education, archival work and scholarships programs. Research and analysis activities may account for up to 15%-20% of a party foundation's budget and activities. Most foundations host in-house academies, research and consulting units, or study groups that focus on foreign policy, on economic and domestic policy, or on empirical social research, thereby fulfilling the typical think tank functions. The think tank work of German political foundations cannot be ignored, but it should not be overrated either. (see Boucher 2004: 18)

(c) The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a small number of more independent advocacy-oriented think tanks, often founded by entrepreneurial academics, politicians or social movement actors such as IWG-Bonn - a miniature version of the American Enterprise Institute

founded by the CDU-politician Kurt Biedenkopf and the economist Meinhard Miegel in 1977, or Germany's first environmental think tank, Öko (Ecology) Institute, Freiburg (1977), or the Foundation for Market Economics⁴ (1982) A small number of market-oriented institutes such as the Institute of Independent Entrepreneurs (ASU-UNI Unternehmerinstitut) and the Ludwig Erhard Foundation have followed suit. The decision to convert the Foundation of Market Economics/ Frankfurter Institute from a loose dialogue forum into a full-fledged advocacy think tank in the early in the decade was influenced by the success of the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute in the United States, as well as by the free market think tanks in Britain.

One of the best examples of a new approach to advocacy research in the shape of a think tank outfit is the Initiative for a New Social Market Economy (INSM). INSM has been financed with nearly 10 million Euros per year over a period of five years by Gesamtmetall, the employers' association for the metal and electrical industry in Germany. INSM is seen by some as the lobbying arm of the Institute of German Industry-Cologne, and by others as an archetypical advocacy think tank working in an advocacy coalition with like-minded scholars, celebrity multipliers (so-called Ambassadors) and business-friendly newspapers and media outlets such as Wirtschaftswoche, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Financial Times Germany, Welt am Sonntag etc. (see Speth 2005) INSM's goal is not to target policy-makers or parties directly, but to influence and change the climate of public opinion in Germany. INSM works with well-established tools of North American and British advocacy think tanks such as rankings, essay competitions, debt clocks etc.

⁴ From 1982 through 2001 this institute was named Frankfurter Institute located in Bad Homburg; it moved to Berlin under its new name in 2001.

There are also several advocacy think tanks, which challenge the policy recommendations of the market-oriented institutes from a Neo-Keynesian or a regulation paradigm. The oldest outfit is the Memorandum Group around Rudolf Hickel (founded 1975), an economics professor at the University of Bremen, others are the Oswald-Nell-Breuning-Institute for Business Ethics at the Jesuit College in Frankfurt, or the network of scientific advisers to the activist group Attac. The newest addition is the neo-Keynesian Macroeconomic Policy Institute (IMK) within the Hans-Böckler-Foundation, which was founded in January 2005 and is run by a former senior research from one of the academic economic think tanks.

The prominence, proliferation and alleged influence of think tanks worldwide has not gone unnoticed by a growing number of young German policy entrepreneurs in their late twenties or early thirties, who only a decade or two ago would have sought a political career in a political party or in a non-research oriented NGO, rather than to create advocacy think tanks run on a shoestring budget and essentially a lot of unpaid or low paid volunteer work. For this new and internationally oriented generation of think tank founders and ‘activists’, think tanks are as natural an inventory of the political space in a late-modern democracy as are parties, interest groups and NGOs. These new ‘mini-tanks’ such as BerlinPolis (Berlin)⁵, the Global Public Policy Institute (Berlin), the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, or the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations (Oberursel/Frankfurt), Deutschland Denken (Cologne), the Global Contract Foundation, or Think Tank 30 Germany (affiliated to the Club of Rome) or others dwarf in comparison to the state-funded and scholarly-oriented

⁵ BerlinPolis seems to emerge as the frontrunner of this group of former ‘mini-tanks’ and in May 2006 has just published the first issue of its Magazine “thinktank”.

think tanks and university institutes.

Some of these mini- think tanks exist as much as network institutes on the Internet than as organizations with office space and staff. Noteworthy of this newest wave of German think tanks is that their funding structure, the idealism of their young activist founders as well as their emphasis on marketing and advocacy and their concentration on a few carefully selected issues, closely resemble some of the American and British advocacy institutes in their early years. These new creations have in common a belief that societal, economic and political reforms in Germany are moving too slowly and that the interests of a younger, post-baby-boom generation are not well represented in political discourse. There is no agreement, however, about the priorities and the desired direction of reforms. Most of these new mini-tanks are refreshingly un-ideological and pragmatic, often beyond partisan politics, but by no means apolitical.

Main Features of the German Think Tank Sector⁶

Type of Research: The majority of the larger academic institutes, the party think tanks, as well as a significant number of established advocacy tanks produce their research in-house. Most think tanks in Germany are neither single-issue institutes nor full-service institutions – although the Bertelsmann Foundation and the larger party foundations, such as the Konrad Adenauer, the Hanns-Seidel and Friedrich Ebert foundations are possible exceptions. The

⁶ The empirical work for this section has been carried out – with thanks from the author - by Martin Hattrup and Tino Jessberger, student research assistants in the Program of Political Management at the Bremen University of Applied Sciences.

majority of think tanks can be classified somewhere in between. Nearly 33% of German think tanks work on economic issues, 26% specialize in labour market issues and 22% focus on social policy. More surprisingly, 27% of institutes deal with foreign and security policy, and 24% devote themselves to issues of European politics. Approximately 20% of think tanks deal with issues such as education, the environment, urban politics and globalisation. There are fewer think tanks (appr. 10-15%) focusing on health care issues, development policy, finance and local politics as well as science, technology and energy.

Most think tanks in Germany – academic think tanks in particular - loudly proclaim their independence and their commitment to objectivity, but these declarations cannot entirely be taken at face value. The values and preferences of senior staff members and/or the overall policy preferences of their sponsors set limits to the range of policy ideas that any given research organization can advocate.

Finances: The most important source of income for German think tanks is still the state – primarily at the national and regional levels, but increasingly at the European Union level as well. 45 of 93 think tanks in our sample received primarily public funding and 22 institutes enjoy mixed public and private funding. Only 21 think tanks are funded more or less exclusively by private sources. Measured by think tank budgets and research staff size the dominance of state funded think tanks is even larger.

Governments on all levels continue to be willing to finance external policy research organizations such as academic and party think tanks. Increasingly, however, the proportion of state funds devoted to the core funding of institutes' activities – which research institutes prefer because it gives them maximum discretion - has been reduced in relation to project funding. Many of the generously core funded academic think tanks as well as the party foundations suffered budget and staff cuts since the

second half of the 1990s or were forced to reorganize after program evaluations had been carried out by institutions such as the Science Council.

In the past, the availability of generous state funding made up for the relative absence of a strong philanthropic tradition of think tank funding in Germany. Ever since the late 1990s, some operating as well as grant-giving foundations such as the German Marshall Fund and a number of smaller foundations began shifting their funding priorities from basic academic research to applied and policy-related work. A very small number of family foundations have been following the American example of funding specific advocacy institutes or party think tanks which they believe share the funders' values and their ideological persuasion. The main beneficiary of this trend has been the Hanns-Seidel-Foundation, which received a 35 million Euro grant from the conservative Ingeborg and Maria Tausend-Foundation in 19997.

Location: At the end of the 1990s, the German Federal Government moved to Berlin. And with it went associations and corporate government-relations offices, some science organisations and journalists and representatives of all sorts of interest groups. The pace and the sound of policy making has changed with the move. The demand for policy analysis and policy commentary has risen as the media environment has become more competitive and organisations working in public affairs, government relations and lobbying have become numerous and more proactive. In terms of geography however, Germany's policy research infrastructure is still fairly decentralized. Think tanks, with the exception of foreign and security policy institutes, are by no means exclusively assembled in the capital Berlin, but rare spread across the country with regional concentrations in

7 The Seidel-Foundation used the bulk of this donation to build a new conference centre at its Munich headquarter.

Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne-Bonn, the Ruhr area, Berlin, Stuttgart and Hamburg-Kiel. This wide scattering of locations is a result of Germany's unique federal structure, of the important role played by the Länder in the financing and foundation of think tanks, of their close attachment to the (equally scattered) academic world, and of the structure of the German media landscape. Very few of the think tanks' most important mouthpieces - national newspapers and magazines - are headquartered in the German capital, but in cities such as Munich, Frankfurt, Hamburg or Düsseldorf.

Staff: By European standards German think tanks are - on average - relatively large organizations. Of 60 think tanks for which staff size is known in detail, 15 employ between 51 and 100 staff and another 13 more than 100. 28 think tanks in this sample employ less than 50 staff. Until recently, recruitment at academic think tanks has almost exclusively followed academic patterns. Many senior staff at academic think tanks hold doctoral degrees, with most being in economics, followed by political science/international relations, and the natural and applied sciences. Senior positions at established think tanks often require qualifications similar to a medium-level or even senior professorship (chair) at a university. In the past, many of the older and larger academic institutes offered a high degree of job security through semi-tenured research positions. In the 1990s, however, job security for new appointments was cut back drastically. This was partly a result of overall budget constraints and the rise of project funding, but also a reflection of the directors' desire for more flexibility in creating new research groups and as a way to avoid the bureaucratization of think tanks.

The revolving door phenomenon that allows people to move freely in and out of government, however, is still extremely rare in Germany. One of the reasons for a certain career path rigidity is structural: unlike the United States, most parliamentary democracies are administered by civil

servants even in the upper echelons of the ministerial bureaucracy. There are few administrative positions available for political appointments from the policy research industry. One strategy to bypass this structural problem is the creation of special advisors and of policy units staffed with external experts in the offices of the head of government as well as of cabinet ministers. Another is the creation of informal and ad hoc consulting arrangements such as temporary commissions, kitchen cabinets or 'chimney rounds', outside the formal governmental structures of decision-making. Whereas reform-minded governments in the 1970s and early 1980s tried the former approach – to strengthen their policy capacity by bringing in external policy experts to work in planning units and internal think tanks – other governments more recently have relied on flexible and less permanent advisory structures such as task forces and temporary commissions. Think tanks are by no means in a privileged position in these advisory structures. They have to compete and cooperate with experts and representative from stakeholding groups and other action-oriented leaders from established interest groups (Thunert 2001).

In the past, the career paths of think tank staff was largely separate from that of civil servants or political practitioners and resembled academic career patterns. In general, this is still the case today, but the exceptions are becoming more frequent. Not only have some prominent policy wonks from economic and environmental think tanks embarked on political or administrative careers, a small but increasing number of younger think tank staff no longer aspire to later career in universities and in academic research. On the other hand, and due to the decentralization of the policy research industry, the social capital of young people working for a spell in a think tank (for a modest salary) as part of a career progression in related fields such as journalism, media, academia, management consulting and political consulting, and politics, is still underdeveloped in

Germany. Finally, there are constant calls for more interchange of personnel and thus of ideas between business, education, politics and the media, but such calls seldom result in practical change. More working groups, planning teams and policy units in the top echelons of politics would very much accelerate such an exchange of personnel and ideas.

Performance and Impact of Think Tanks in Germany

Assessing the impact and performance of think tanks appears to be fraught with difficulty. This is in part because of the diversity of aims and approaches, in part because scholars, journalists, public managers and others have devoted relatively little attention to it and also because, in an emerging policy situation especially, where many are jockeying for position and many voices are raised, it is hard to know who has “hit the target. While we are unable to identify unequivocally which think tanks are the most influential in Germany and why, the literature suggests that an analysis of their access to the policy process, both formal (through commissioned reports, representation on committees, etc.) and informal (social gatherings, networking, etc.), as well as their use of the mass media, holds the key to influence. There is a tendency, therefore, to develop proxy measures of effectiveness, such as how much media attention think tanks get, how well their publications sell, how well-attended their conferences are and how they fare generally in the court of public opinion.

Strategies of German Think Tanks⁸

German think tanks are active on three levels: in the scientific community, in direct policy consulting and in contacts with the general public via the media. 95% of German think tanks produce books to disseminate their research. An equally large percentage of 94% potentially use television and radio interviews to achieve similar goals. 67% of think tanks publish articles in scholarly journals, while 40% are involved in publishing journals. Half of all think tanks in Germany edit and distribute newsletters. One third of German think tanks use conferences and seminars, but only 14% of institutes contribute to newspapers op-ed pages or publish policy briefs.

Traditionally, the most important target groups for German think tanks are other research institutes and universities on both the national and international level, followed by the members, caucuses and committees of the Bundestag, then the bureaucracies of the government ministries. These are followed in turn by individual political parties and certain segments of the quality press, and at some distance by boards of management and company directors, trade union and non-governmental organizations. German think tanks, thus it has been said, seem to prefer direct means

⁸ Empirical data for the following sections has been collected from the following sources: i. From a survey of 30 German think tanks of different types and policy areas conducted by the author between 1996 and 1997 that was replicated with the same questions by a team of researchers (Martin Thunert, Martin Hatrup and Tino Jessberger) in 2006. ii. Secondary sources such as Braml 2004, Reinicke 1996, and Federal Court of Audit (Bundesrechnungshof)1996, Gellner 1995 as well as background interview with think tank staff. These sources have yielded data that can help illustrate especially how think tanks decide on their strategies and target groups.

of influencing policy-makers instead of indirect means via the public and the media (see e.g. Braml 2004).

A closer look reveals that the intended targets of German think tanks actually vary. One of the preferred targets undoubtedly is a small group of decision-makers in the senior ranks of government and parliament who get advice from many quarters and individuals. Although many German institutes judge their communicative proximity to these decision-makers on a national and regional level to be satisfactory, contact with political leadership especially on the European and the transnational level generally leaves much to be desired – individual exceptions such as CAP or the political foundations notwithstanding. Some think tanks admit that they are still ill equipped to judge what officials consider relevant and insightful. While working quietly behind the scenes to influence the course of government policy would be the preferred style of many German think tanks - as well as the one that comes most naturally to many policymakers - think tank directors realize that they by no means enjoy a consulting monopoly on direct channels of influence and those think tanks who are not particularly plugged into government may get very little feedback.

Therefore it does not come as a surprise that German institutes are very press-oriented, even though their preference might have been direct channels of influence: their most favoured media target groups include the political and economic editors of German quality dailies and weeklies. Strategic alliances of think tanks with sympathetic print media has become an important dissemination tool for think tank research results. Some national dailies particularly *Handelsblatt* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* monitor think tanks and their work more consistently than in the past.

In contrast, the majority of think tanks – with the exception of foreign policy think tanks in times of international crises - traditionally maintained rather distant relations with television and cable networks. But with a more

competitive television news and business news market this has been changing over the past decade: relations between economic policy experts in think tanks and the business editors of the TV and radio stations have intensified. Analysts from think tanks are sought more frequently as commentators – not only on international affairs issues, but on domestic social and economic issues as well.

As far as networking with educational and other civil society institutions at an international level is concerned, German think tanks active in this field like the party foundations hold their own⁹. Domestically, more think tanks recognize that in an age in which people are loosening their ties with specific political parties and with mass organizations in general, communication with the so-called public at-large as a target group must receive a higher priority than has hitherto been the case. In addition, the internet has opened up opportunities for offering interested citizens and stakeholder groups outside the traditional corporatist interests direct access to expert opinion and information, thus bypassing the traditional media. In general, aggressive self-promotion of the institute and noisy marketing of its products is a strategy that has been adapted more cautiously in Germany than elsewhere, but some recently appointed think tank directors and most of the founding-directors of young upstarts have been pushing their institutes into this direction. Some think tanks and individual scholars have attempted to have an impact by “laymanizing” academic research findings in fields such as demographic or climate change as well as social policy or macroeconomics to make them more accessible to busy policy-makers, journalists and the general public; others are colluding with sympathetic ministers and public affairs specialists to stage events for the media. Even among most academic think tanks

⁹ For a more detailed analysis of international activities of German think tanks see Thunert 2000.

the trend is clearly away from almost exclusively producing books, but tends towards short, readable monographs, occasional papers and issue briefs. The Internet is also used increasingly not only to raise the profile of the think tanks, but also to market their products and disseminate short opinion pieces.

Think Tanks' Role in the Policymaking Process

Influence of think tanks in the policymaking process depends a great deal on the model of policy decision-making that one uses as well on variables such as the policy field (closeness or openness of policy communities in a given policy field), the institutional source and the location of the think tank (closeness to government or closeness to civil society) and the stage of the policymaking process. The advisory needs of decision-makers are neither uniform across branches of government and agencies, nor across time (see Weaver/Stares 2001).

Much of the international literature on think tanks and other advice-giving organisations in the policy process still uses the traditional stages model of breaking down the policy cycle into different stages – (1) problem definition and agenda-setting, (2) selection and formal decision-making, (3) policy implementation and evaluation - as a frame of reference, even though it is an excessively linear view of the policy process. (see Weaver/Stares 2001, Abelson 2002, to a lesser extent Stone 1996) Despite its limitations the stages-model is useful in outlining the different functions think tanks might play in policy-making and in operationalizing think tank activities. (see Howlett/Ramesh 1995). International research on the role of experts (see Weaver/Stares 2001) has demonstrated that policy-relevant knowledge fulfills different roles at different stages of the

process. Expertise appears mostly as warning and guidance during the agenda-setting stage, as support, legitimacy and ammunition in the decision-making stage, and as technical assistance and assessment on the implementation stage. Few, if any German think tanks are active simultaneously at every stage of the process, nor does their expertise fulfill every one of these roles.

Because policy-making can be far more messy and chaotic than the policy cycle model suggests, alternative explanations such as the “garbage can model” emphasise the opportunism of decision-makers, their time constraints, and other limitations on the proper utilisation of think tank research, and view policymaking as confused and fragmented rather than composed of neat ‘stages’.

Neo-institutionalist approaches to policymaking on the other hand, emphasize the limited impact of external knowledge-based institutions challenging the status quo, due to the dynamics of path dependency of established institutional settings. Constructivist theories and network approaches to policy-making focusing on the importance of believe-systems (advocacy coalitions, epistemic communities, discourse coalitions) emphasize the importance of expertise and knowledge-based actors over interest-based actors, but understand knowledge not as “objective” or “scientific”, but as inherently contested, identity-focused and socially constructed (see Gellner 1995, Stone 1996).

Network approaches to policymaking are well suited to explain the strategies of advocacy tanks. In Germany as elsewhere they align themselves with sympathetic actors - from governmental bodies, national newspapers, business firms or the non-profit sector - within advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1983). They market value-driven policy recommendations through op-ed opinions, host conferences with prominent keynoters, they undertake educational activities targeted to tomorrow’s elites, and are eager for

appearances in the media¹⁰. At the end of the day, however, only an eclectic combination of these theoretical approaches will be able to develop some ‘empirically informed’ hypotheses about the policy influence of think tanks in Germany.

Public Agenda: ‘Agenda setting’ is about influencing which issues receive attention and which are excluded from public discussion. While think tanks and policy researchers are one small group in this process, competing against other actors to influence the policy agenda, their potential to shape what is called the “public agenda” should not be underestimated. Unlike some of their competing public agenda-setters think tanks in Germany are not distracted from public agenda-setting by other preoccupations such as teaching large groups of students and basic research (universities and academies), organizing memberships or direct action (interest groups and NGOs), governing and managing day-to-day politics (political parties and bureaucracies), increasing circulation and viewerships (newspapers and TV) etc. What often distracts think tanks from their core missions is funding, but as been demonstrated earlier this is a major problem only for a minority of German think tanks.

Problem identification and issue definition are central to the public agenda and both academic think tanks as well as media-savvy advocacy institutes have the tools to shape expert opinion, policy makers’ opinion and public opinion in regard to alternative policy ideas. In German political culture, which values ‘Wissenschaftlichkeit’ (a scientific front), the high scholarly reputation of academic think tanks gives their warnings, forecasts and scenarios more credibility than those of quasi-interests and advocacy groups, and, in turn, academic credibility enhances their usefulness as sources of

¹⁰ See Speth 2006 for an example of such advocacy campaigns from market-liberal and conservative forces.

information and analyses for journalists and policy-makers¹¹. On the other hand, while perhaps lacking in legitimacy, some advocacy think tanks have been much faster and clearer in adapting successful think tank strategies from abroad – in most cases from the United States – and/or in strengthening the communication and dissemination of their work and the media prominence of their senior scholars. While the evidence is mounting in the 2006 survey conducted by Thunert, Hattrup and Jessberger that more German think tanks than in the past are trying to improve their communication strategies and participate in policy-making networks such as advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities, their achievements in actually moving the climate of opinion in Germany are much harder to measure.

Decision-Making: It is far more difficult for think tanks to exercise a decisive impact on the formal decision agenda, which includes policy items that political and bureaucratic decision-makers accept, require their attention and are in need of short-term resolution, and on the stage of decision-making itself. In a “Survey of the Health Policymaking Process in European countries (UK, Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, France) and the United States” for instance, the Japanese Institute for Health Economics and Policy (IHEP) compared the drafting and consensus formation processes for the reform of health security systems in these countries¹². Comparing the major

¹¹ While there is no conclusive data for Germany other than the finding that academic quality is the feature more than 90% of German think tanks were proudest of in the 1997 and 2006 surveys conducted by this author, empirical studies from the U.S. have shown that especially journalists value the work of think tanks – and academic think tanks in particular – more serious and credible than the work of interest and advocacy groups. (see Rich 2004)

¹² <http://www.ihep.jp/english/product/pro12.htm> accessed May 10, 2006.

characteristics of health reform planning by asking who took leadership in health policy reform planning and where the input of policy ideas came from, the Japanese survey mentioned the active involvement of think tanks and policy groups only in the United States and the United Kingdom, whereas in the German, Swedish and Dutch cases the strong input of party policy committees and interest groups are mentioned. The reform process was led in all cases mainly by government party leaders and by administrative leaders.

On the other hand, individual (academic) think tank directors and senior researchers in Germany are by no means excluded from institutionalised consulting relationships with decision-makers such as departmental planning groups, ministerial scientific councils and governmental or parliamentary study commissions (see e.g. Brede 2006 for policy advice the health policy field). Some independent advocacy think tanks and certain units or researchers of some academic institutes have cautiously started to adapt the strategies of their American counterparts to provide ammunition and intellectual support to advocacy coalitions during policy selection and enactment. Party think tanks can become powerful intra-party agenda-setting resources, especially when their party is in the opposition and their access to governmental policy capacity is rather restricted. Still, individual exceptions notwithstanding, opportunities for think tanks to enter the policy-making process in the earlier stages of policy development remain higher than in the stage of policy ratification and enactment, where actors related to political parties and formal governmental institutions seem to be most influential.

Implementation, monitoring and evaluation are further aspects of the policy process on which experts can have a significant impact. Implementation and evaluation are usually seen as undertaken in-house by the federal bureaucracy or the Federal Court of Audit. This is not entirely the case. While some specialized think tanks, which

rely heavily on contract research, have been active in policy implementation, this aspect of the policy process has become the domain of commercial consultants, more often than not from the world of international management consulting and accounting industry (see Raffel 2006)¹³. (Unsolicited) monitoring and evaluation has been a growing activity of some academic and some advocacy think tanks – usually through the development of performance indexes and rankings – from more technical indexes measuring consumer confidence or the business climate to highly politicised and controversial rankings of educational institutions, the competitiveness of business locations etc.

Outlook: Think Tanks in Germany – their Limits and their Potential

Germany has more and on average better-funded think tanks than other larger European countries with the possible exception of the United Kingdom. While some in the German think tank community see the continuation of generous public funding as a precondition of policy research produced without the influence of private interests, others are or have been forced by slashed subsidies to actively acquire more private funding. However, the readiness of German firms and citizens to give cash to the churning out of ideas instead of donating to cultural and social causes should neither be over- nor underestimated. Compared to the United States, institutional philanthropy is still underdeveloped in Germany, so many think tanks will continue to depend on public funding in the foreseeable future. But the situation is gradually changing: private sponsorship of think tank outfits,

¹³ For a highly controversial journalistic assessment of the policy advisory role of management consultants in Germany see Leif 2006.

of think tank activities and think tank research fellowships will not reach American proportions in the near future, but it is already larger than it ever used to be – thanks to some corporate and family foundations and often to international corporations operating in Germany (see e.g. Rinke 2006).

A number of German best-funded economic, social and foreign-policy think tanks – many of them members of the Leibniz-Society - had to learn over the past decade that public funding does not come without strings attached. When publicly funded academic think tanks are being evaluated by bodies like the Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat) - a joint federal-state advisory body with an explicit mandate to make recommendations and statements on developments in higher education and other research establishments like the publicly funded think tanks – or the Leibniz-Society, the criteria by which these institutes are being judged are the standard academic criteria used in the evaluation of university departments and of institutions of basic research - above all the number of publications of institute staff in top international refereed journals. This imperative makes at least some sectors of these institutes more research-driven, and perhaps less policy and public debate-oriented. As critics – most from the non-academic world -have noted, the idea brokerage functions of think tanks are not taken into much consideration in purely academic evaluations of German think tanks (see Ackermann/Gräf 2006).

In the past, they contend, some academic think tanks – mainly economic research institutes - received a negative evaluation by the Science Council precisely because they were considered too policy-oriented and too disconnected from the cutting edges of academic research¹⁴. If think

¹⁴ The HWWA received a negative Science Council evaluation in 1998 and is in the process of being dissolved as a Leibniz-Society research institute. However, its research unit has de facto been rescued from shutdown through privatization as the HWWI. Other think tanks with a formerly partly negative evaluation like IFO-Institute have sharpened

tanks on the other hand, sometimes the same or similar publicly funded institutes, are judged and evaluated by their potential users in the higher civil service or in politics, a different and somewhat conflicting message emerges. While the ‘academic message’ wants them to become more research-oriented and more theoretical, the ‘users’ message’ urges them to become more policy-relevant and user friendly, more conscious of the laws governing the political world and thereby more strategic (see e.g. Bundesrechnungshof 1996, Ackermann/Gräf 2006). Politicians in elected office increasingly depend on, and thus ask for, a mixture of (scientific) policy advice and political consulting. A survey conducted among policy-making civil servants in the premiers’ offices on the state level (echoed by similar studies on other levels of government) showed that marketing and communication expertise (public relations, polling, ‘spin’ skills etc.) are deemed as important as, and sometimes more important than, detailed policy expertise (Mielke 1999:15). While these responses show that policy advice cannot be strictly separated from political advice, some researchers in academic think tanks continue to shy away from providing a mix of both, resorting instead to purely scientific advice, hoping that more sophisticated conclusions and uncompromising research results will at the end of the day be more convincing to both the public and the decision-makers than more easily digestible recommendations and better marketable second-best solutions. In the German case, legacies from the past, especially the manipulation of knowledge first by the Nazis and later by the ruling communist party in East Germany may have accentuated the

their research profile through close affiliation with university research institutes and have received positive evaluations by the Leibniz-Society more recently (see Ackermann/Gräf 2006).

15 A similar message was communicated to foreign affairs think tanks in Germany in the late 1990s (see Federal Court of Audit 1996, Klaiber 1996).

tendency of many think tanks - even those who advocate a particular policy paradigm – to present a scientific front and to sacrifice general comprehensibility to academic standards¹⁶. Thus, some practitioners accuse academic think tanks and their staff to fail to pay sufficient attention to the political context in which their recommendations will be discussed and to the organizational, managerial and implementation dimensions of an issue.

Private sponsors of think tanks, however, are often primarily interested in a certain amount of public and media attention devoted to think tank work or to the topics and paradigms a sponsored think tank deals with. Henceforth one can expect German think tanks to become more media and advocacy-oriented the higher the percentage of funding from private sources will become. Some private sponsors might even expect the think tank not just to be visible in public debates, but to advocate the sponsor's particular agenda (for the latter position see e.g. Speth 2006).

While an exclusive reliance of state funding has become a mixed blessing especially for those academic think tanks, which would like to become more policy- and marketing oriented, the perils of relying on a single or a small amount of private donors might be equally obvious. Whereas some in Germany still see the Washington marketplace of ideas as a model, American think tank experts point to the dangers in think tanks' desire to cultivate a certain proximity to political elites in Berlin or Brussels or to the media: proficiency in techniques of influence, advocacy and media visibility might be acquired at the expense of intellectual rigour and credibility. (see eg. Rich 2004)

With its strong tradition of public funding for think

¹⁶ The overwhelming majority of think tanks in the author's 1996/97 and 2006 survey rejected the notion that a think tank should follow an identifiable ideology and more than 75% of respondents distanced themselves from the term "advocacy" or "interest-oriented" institute.

tanks and the market forces driving some think tanks into seeking more private support in the future, at best Germany might develop a healthy mix of privately and publicly funded think tanks, sometimes cooperating, sometimes competing and sometimes learning from each other.

As far as influence on both the public agenda as well as on the decision-making agenda is concerned, and taking into account the lessons of other countries like Britain (see Thunert 2006), think tanks in Germany may only reach their full potential, if they accept something like the concept of “policy entrepreneurship” as their central mission¹⁷. Policy entrepreneurs realize that policy relevant research takes place in collaboration with research users, ensuring research that is relevant for practical and policy purposes, they are able to think strategically and recognize the opening and closing of policy windows. They are fully aware that crises can force an issue in or out of the official decision agenda and their institutes are prepared, when crises open windows of opportunity for new policy ideas. They have an understanding that decision-making in a federal parliamentary democracy is driven by a chain of foreseeable (elections, party conferences, EU presidencies etc.) as well as unpredictable and unforeseeable events (avian flu, terrorism, natural disasters, sudden policy failures etc.). Policy entrepreneurs form linkages between problems in need of solution, policy alternatives discussed in academic circles and the calendar as well as the power logic of practical politics. Finally, think tanks as policy entrepreneurs are aware that their recommendations cannot be implemented without being reinterpreted, redesigned, and repositioned in ways that they could perhaps explore, but at the end of the day cannot influence.

Even casual observers of the German think tank

¹⁷ Here I adapt concepts developed by John Kingdon (1995) for the U.S. policy-making context.

landscape have noticed that a new generation think tank directors appointed between the late 1990s and today in established institutes, policy-oriented academics at university-based research centers and in consulting bodies as well as younger researchers in new think tanks, are slowly changing the political culture of policy research in Germany (see Economist 2004). Above everything else the move of Germany's capital from Bonn to Berlin has prompted some young policy entrepreneurs to start their own think tank outfits. This new generation does not treat applied policy-oriented research with the same suspicion as it was twenty or thirty years ago. One may even state that the validity of once widely held equation that excellence in basic research implies policy irrelevance and vice-versa is now being called into question. Some of the new think tank directors and council members – especially in economic and foreign policy research institutes – have been reorganizing their institutes, sometimes moved location to be closer to “government quarters¹⁸”, challenge their staff to produce more internationally competitive, cutting-edge research, to venture into thinking the unthinkable and to become more policy-relevant and audience oriented at the same time.

A new generation of think tank directors and think tank staff understand that the market of commissioning of reports and studies has become more international and more competitive. Competition between established academic institutes, some of the more flexible and practically oriented newcomers to the German scene, international institutes and commercial advisors, for a hearing, for ideas and for money will become harder. Ideas used in public policy-making are also being developed commercially in Germany – especially on the interfaces between technology, the environment and

¹⁸ See the most recent attempt to move the German Institute of Economic Research (DIW) from suburban Berlin-Dahlem to the city centre.

society, and in the worlds of finance and fiscal policy as well as in public management. In an age of global information and consultancy markets, both large commercial consulting agencies as well as non-profits and think tanks at home and abroad stand ready to take up commission in Germany. Thus, in the future, more think tanks in Germany will go head to head not only with one another, but also with other players in the field, including university-based research units, government relations and consulting firms, and so forth.

Whether the German think tank community and those who fund them will live up to these challenges remains to be seen. Ultimately, the policy influence of think tanks in Germany will be directly proportional to the further weakening of corporatist structures of policy-making, and their replacement by network-shaped policy-making institutions. Think Tanks in Germany –like in Brussels (see Boucher 2004) – remain a mission to be completely fulfilled.

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