

Robert B. Owens

Thomas Medvetz, "Think Tanks in America. Chicago": University of Chicago Press, 2012, 324 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/75781)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2013

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 324 pp.**

10.2383/75781

Thomas Medvetz's first book, *Think Tanks in America*, examines the formation of the "space of think tanks" and the concomitant "political folk category" used to designate the organizations that populated that space in the latter half of the twentieth century. This rather convoluted formulation of the project is a direct consequence of the author's engagement with the existing literature: Medvetz here rejects the terms in which sociologists have typically understood think tanks and aims to persuade them to ask different questions. He presents the reader with three standard explanations for the origins and function of think tanks in America: 1) that think tanks are part of the machinery of a unified "power elite;" 2) that think tanks are sites for competition among organized interest groups (the "pluralist view"); and 3) that think tanks are best understood with reference to the structural environment in which they are embedded, i.e., that they are best viewed through the frame of modern institutionalism. All of these, Medvetz argues, ultimately fail on the same ground by taking for granted the scope of think tank activity (to influence national politics first and foremost) and the meaningfulness of the category "think tank" itself.

Medvetz rejects the label "think tank" for the late-Progressive Era institutions that have commonly been called the first think tanks, including the early Brookings Institution (est. 1916), the Russell Sage Foundation (1907) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910). In Medvetz's rendering, these are "proto-think tanks," which did not initially and were by no means destined to share the same "social form" with each other or with later arrivals like RAND (est. 1948), the Institute for Policy Studies (1963) and the Heritage Foundation (1973). The "crystallization of the space of think tanks" took place as a result of strategic convergence in the 1960s, 70s and 80s between two groups vying for elite attention and political influence: technocratic researchers and activist-experts. According to Medvetz, the members of these two groups converged towards roughly similar strategies of self-presentation, thus constituting and occupying a new "space" in the competitive field of policy knowledge production – a field also occupied by university professors, so-called "public intellectuals" and technicians working in the service of government. Most of the book is taken up with recounting, in theoretical and empirical terms, what it meant for such a "space" to appear in an already crowded field and what consequences it has had for policy knowledge.

Crucial to the argument is a graphical presentation of the field effects exerting pressure on producers of expert knowledge (chapter 3, p.93), where Medvetz aims to show how the space of think tanks emerged from strategic convergence of actors in the field. The axes of this graph represent a spectrum from public engagement to disengagement in one dimension and from political dependence to independence in another. In this visual rendering, the space of think tanks is neutral on the engagement/disengagement spectrum (located right on the horizontal axis) and leans slightly towards dependency (i.e., slightly left-of-center from the vertical axis).

Chapter 5 presents the most sustained empirical analysis, a discussion of the debates over welfare reform during the Clinton years and the role that think tank knowledge production had in shaping the final version of the 1996 welfare reform act. Medvetz presents this empirical discussion as a kind of “crucial test” for his theoretical agenda: because so much has been written already about this historical episode, Medvetz’s field theory will decisively prove its worth if it can add to our understanding of events.

Medvetz’s book is written for professional sociologists, and it is overtly theoretical, framed with an “approach [...] derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and recent extensions [...] by scholars such as Gil Eyal and Loïc Wacquant” (p. 16). Unlike many American sociologists who selectively pick up terminology or strands of argument from Bourdieu, Medvetz seems committed to carrying out a relatively faithful application of Bourdieu’s theory of elite competition as demonstrated in, for example, *Homo Academicus* and *The Rules of Art*. Medvetz lays out on p. 24 the main operative concepts: *social space*, *field*, *capital* and *field of power*. Chapter 4, “The Rules of Policy Research,” recalls Bourdieu’s *The Rules of Art* and attempts the same holistic understanding of a field governed by rules that appear stable and given to its occupants while in fact being produced by their strategic interactions. In one of the very best analytic moments in the book, Medvetz quotes a Heritage Foundation employee who has managed to redefine “credibility” in a manner utterly at odds with normal usage, apparently without even noticing the incongruity: for him credibility becomes “not an attribute that can be measured in universalistic terms, but a practical achievement rooted in the ability to coordinate specific social ties and relations” (p. 139).

The Bourdieusian field-based account very successfully highlights the limitations of the traditional analyses of think tanks that Medvetz challenges at the outset and illustrates the centrality of conceptual boundary-work to many persistent problems in sociology. Medvetz is quite correct that our need to conceptualize social phenomena of interest in clear and precise terms stands in tension with our need to approach the social world naïvely, so as to limit the extent to which our definitions prejudice our findings. It is an ambitious methodological critique that would implicate elite theory à la C. Wright Mills, pluralist theory and modern institutionalism in all committing the same, disqualifying interpretive error, but Medvetz pulls off just such a critique with admirable clarity and succinctness.

However, Medvetz overstates the explanatory power of his version of the field-theoretic approach. Running throughout the central chapter on the “crystallization of the space of think tanks” (chapter 3) is the claim that activist-experts and technocrats converged to the emergent space of think tanks because the center of the field was its most stable point (pp. 39, 89ff.). Why would weak political dependence emerge as the point of maximum stability for the group of think tanks? Medvetz’s answer is that “the center of the field is the best position from which to fend off challenges from outsiders and maintain one’s clients” (p. 89), but the empirical evidence here is uneven. Much is made of Charles Murray’s ability to establish himself as an influential political commentator by “existing near the field’s *center*” (p. 90) with the publication of his book *Losing Ground* in 1984. But one can point to many other policy-oriented intellectuals, many of whom appear in Medvetz’s book, who attained similar levels of political influence only after establishing stellar credentials as university scholars – a “marginal” initial position, in

Medvetz's narrative. Set up against figures like David Riesman, John Kenneth Galbraith, Milton Friedman and William Julius Wilson, Murray looks more like an exception than an exemplar of a new type.

On the institutional level, Medvetz offers short vignettes about the strategic moves to the center of four think tanks: Brookings, the Institute for Policy Studies, Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute (pp. 98ff.). There are some important insights here – for example, that IPS and Heritage were both responding to a competitive challenge from Brookings, even while they had very different interpretations of what kind of an organization Brookings was. What is missing is a broader view of the field and clear counterfactual examples of organizations that adopted different strategies and failed. Why did *these* organizations conceive of one another as their primary competition? Quotes from former Brookings head Bruce MacLaury illustrate the “political folk category” of the think tank firmly entrenched but not in formation: “one had better be aware of one’s competition” and “we are a think tank. We are not a university” (pp. 110–111). Without a broader view of competitive dynamics in the field, and without a fuller account of how MacLaury and his peers came to the shared understanding that they were one another’s primary competition, the claim that the center of the field is the competitive equilibrium point risks surrendering field theory’s promise to explain how think tanks came to be without relying on a preformed image what think tanks were destined or “wanted” to be.

Medvetz does not give a realistic appraisal of university researchers and their place in the field of competition, which is a significant shortcoming in his fundamentally relational sociology. While he allows in one passage that “the search for the totally unencumbered intellectual is a futile one, since all intellectuals – from the college professor who must “publish or perish” to the technocrat who cannot challenge the basic premises of her research assignment – face certain necessities and constraints in their work” (p. 153), more frequently his analysis of the field tacitly assumes that the universities can be sources of “autonomously produced social scientific knowledge” (p. 225) that are neither encumbered by nor systematically biased towards specific political and ideological positions. In the very last line of the book Medvetz asks rhetorically, “should money and political power direct ideas, or should ideas direct themselves?” (p. 226). The notion that this is a viable choice – that ideas could “direct themselves” in the universities (or anywhere else) without being heavily conditioned by existing political, professional and disciplinary structures – is at odds with both Medvetz’s general theoretical position and empirical research on the politics and research practices of the professoriate.

Finally, the theoretical terminology that Medvetz deploys remains unclear in places. He alternates between describing a single “field of expertise” (e.g., pp. 92, 122), with different “regions” wherein intellectual identity is defined differently, and describing the interactions of multiple fields – a “political field,” a “bureaucratic field,” a “field of cultural production,” a “media field” and an “economic field” (e.g., pp. 37, 132) – and actors who can move across them and occupy multiple fields at once. What is more, the key regions of contestation (bureaucratic, political, cultural, economic, media) that are posited in chapter 1 (pp. 36–37) and come to the fore in chapter 4 are not clearly mapped onto chapter 3’s graphical representation of convergence in the field of expertise (p. 93). The issue here is not the embedding of the field of expertise within a broader

“field of power” (as in Bourdieu 1996, pp. 215); nor is this a manifestation of Medvetz’s methodological insistence that “we will need to build the *structural blurriness* of the object [think tanks] into our conceptualization itself” (p. 16). As far as this reviewer can tell, the several passages cited above do not amount to a single, internally consistent description of the field “topology” (p. 132), which in turn invites skepticism about the theory’s ultimate heuristic value.

Despite these explanatory limitations, Medvetz’s book is a welcome contribution that may help to revivify the sociology of intellectuals. He is right that the debates over the decline of “public intellectuals,” initiated by Russell Jacoby, and over the possibility of a “public sociology,” initiated by Michael Burawoy, have generated “more heat than light” (p. 21). Medvetz does a service in turning our attention towards structural conditions surrounding the luminary public intellectuals that Russell so admires and towards the external competitors that are likely, at least in the near future, to prevent the emergence of the kind of public sociology Burawoy hopes to see. Not all the answers in *Think Tanks in America* are persuasive, but by insisting on a methodologically reflexive, relational sociology, Medvetz encourages us to ask new and productive questions – questions that may ultimately reunite our understanding of public intellectuals, university research, think tanks and policy knowledge in a holistic and reenergized sociology of intellectuals.

B. Robert Owens  
University of Chicago

## References

- Bourdieu P.  
1984 *Homo Academicus*. Paris: Les editions de Minuit.  
1996 *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Murray C.  
1984 *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980*. New York: Basic books.