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Many of the questions which concern us in our social, political and economic lives are questions of knowledge, whether they concern the extent and consequences of climate change, the efficacy of new drugs, the scope of surveillance technologies or the accreditation and performance of individuals and organizations. This is because what we know - how we acquire and apply knowledge of various kinds - shapes the ways in which problems are identified and understood; how laws, rules and norms are constructed and maintained, and which goods and services offered to whom. 'Who gets what, when, how', in Lasswell's phrase, depends very much on who knows what, when, how.

In our personal, professional and public lives, knowledge is a key resource. It matters in policy not only as a guide to decision making but because, in many circumstances, to be knowledgeable is to be powerful. Some kinds of knowledge are created and held by small numbers of specialists, while others are widely distributed and quickly shared. The credibility and authority of different kinds of knowledge varies over time and our means of developing and sharing knowledge are currently undergoing rapid changes as new digital technologies and social media platforms emerge. This book series is an interdisciplinary forum to explore these issues and more. In short, we are interested in the politics of knowledge. The series encompasses diverse topics, methods and disciplines and we welcome proposals for solo-authored, co-authored and edited books. Please contact the series editors, Kat Smith (Katherine.smith@ed.ac.uk) and Sotiria Grek (Sotiria.Grek@ed.ac.uk) to discuss your initial ideas and outline proposals. Kat Smith and Sotiria Grek are the Co-Directors of SKAPE (the Centre for Science, Knowledge and Policy) at the University of Edinburgh, UK. <http://www.skape.ed.ac.uk>

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Marcos González Hernando

**British Think Tanks
After the 2008
Global Financial
Crisis**

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macmillan

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To my family, old and new.

Foreword

Riders on the Storm: British Think Tanks and the Financial Crisis

Described a generation ago as merely ‘second hand dealers of ideas,’ today think tanks are often first in the frontline of contemporary policy debates. Think tanks provide ‘explanations’ for interpreting the causes and consequences of problems to help policymakers and publics understand the challenges they face. It is at the core of think tanks’ ‘business’ to propose policy ideas and promote their recommendations. In order to do this, and be sustainable, they need policymakers, as well as society at large, to trust that they possess relevant knowledge and expertise which decision-makers can act upon. That is, think tanks must not only hold epistemic authority, but must be seen to wield it by ‘truth-seeking’—through sound and rigorous analysis—rather than being motivated by what is economically, politically, or otherwise convenient. As such, the institutes that are the subject of this volume were thrown into the Financial Crisis—a storm they failed to predict, yet were positively energised by.

No matter their very different positions on the ideological and political spectrum, all four British think tanks that are the centre of analysis seek to be seen as ‘sound’ in their analysis and ‘moderate’ in their recommendations. As Marcos González Hernando ably recounts, their organisational careers in the crisis have been marked by successes with regards to gaining policy access and media acclaim, but their experiences in the policy debate are also littered with failures and false starts. He argues that the majority of previous studies on think tanks prioritise understanding their policy impact and thereby miss half the story; delving into the organisational ‘black box’ to scrutinise their internal functioning is just as fascinating. As a rule, he claims, in both ideological and material terms, think tanks are much more unstable and complex than they appear to outsiders.

The 2008 crisis caught many think tanks off-guard—as was the case with most political scientists and economists. Nevertheless, it was a ‘fateful moment’ providing a window of opportunity for the public, politicians, and policymakers to reflect profoundly upon the foundations of our socioeconomic order. As Marcos González Hernando argues, “this was not only an economic crisis but also an epistemic, political, and perhaps even a moral one.” Given their *raison d’être*, think tanks were strongly compelled to offer explanations of the crisis and intervene in debates on the repercussions of the crisis. “Without an explanation, one cannot offer advice” González Hernando argues, and then outlines how the four performed predictably with regards to their ‘public interventions’ in the policy debate:

[...] a left-of-centre think tank would criticise the deregulation of the financial industry, and a sense of disappointment would follow after austerity became official policy. Conversely, a free-market think tank would be expected to chastise regulation and blame public officials rather than the private sector, greed, or the free market itself. An academic-technocratic organisation would most likely try to present itself as a neutral arbiter following evidence and arguing for its supremacy, and one supporting a party in government would devise a plan and—if seen to be animating actual policy—defend it through its implementation.

Notwithstanding their adherence to this ‘script,’ these think tanks were dramatically impacted by the crisis, especially in how they engaged with

their publics, how they fashioned their analysis, and how they managed their internal affairs and in-house scholarly differences on policy issues. Think tanks are under pressure; this is the central theme of this volume.

In one sense this pressure can be seen in material terms. Worldwide, the think tank industry has not emerged unscathed from the Global Financial Crisis. Although there is little systematic available data, anecdotal accounts strongly suggest conditions of economic austerity have entailed lean times for think tanks. Over the past half century, the British think tank industry has grown, yet it seems the growth of existing funding sources and the development of new streams of donor support have proceeded at a slower pace. Even though British Government agencies and ministries are reliant on external expertise and have been a relatively consistent source of support for think tanks, the political field has become increasingly hermetic to external sources of advice and expertise. Besides, even at the best of times, funding agency preferences can be fickle. The UK's economic and social science research grant programmes increasingly impose guidelines on research activity. Wealthy individuals, corporate donors, charitable trusts, government departments, EU institutions, local government, and trade organisations have their own requisites, not only on the research agenda but also on how research output is delivered and disseminated. Resources are spread more thinly as donor expectations of policy impact increase. These circumstances have not only heightened competition among think tanks but also with other purveyors of policy analysis.

Concomitantly, the 'policy wonk' has become ubiquitous in more and more walks of life. Today there is more interchangeability between the 'think tank' and the 'academic' public intellectual. Universities have established their own institutes and 'policy labs' which sometimes rival think tanks. Many of the world's leading NGOs have developed a strong in-house capacity for policy research. Business associations, multinational corporations, banks, professional bodies, and trade unions are becoming better able to proselytise their policy perspectives with in-house research units or through more skilled use of social media.

Advances in telecommunications, as well as social networking, have fundamentally altered the environment in which think tanks operate. The twentieth century witnessed the rise of the think tank as an

organisational form; might the twenty-first presage their decline? This is unlikely, Marcos González Hernando argues, due to the ‘plasticity’ of think tanks and how their organisational identities ‘cross boundaries.’ Through their oftentimes mobile and malleable workforce, think tanks are able to keep a presence in the media and NGO worlds while also engaging political and policy elites.

The four British think tanks in this study adapted constantly. They built sophisticated websites and professionalised their in-house communications offices. They jockeyed for position among different audiences via social media, press events, and closed meetings. And think tanks do retain some competitive advantages. The ‘revolving door’ benefits provided by think tank have not yet been undermined. Retiring politicians, diplomats, and civil servants will continue to seek out their post-retirement perch in a policy institute. Governments and the media will continue to seek out quality analysis and ‘sound-bites’ from think tank experts—at least for as long as think tanks position and project themselves as academically reliable.

Yet, popular disenchantment with the role of experts has ramped up societal questioning of think tanks. In our hyper-partisan world, the think tank industry often sharpens divisiveness rather than understanding in public debates. Marcos González Hernando suggests that some think tanks have helped undermine their own sources of authority. That is, societal unease and uncertainty over our capacity to describe the world (an epistemic crisis) has fostered a wariness over the trustworthiness of traditional sources of expert knowledge (a generalised crisis of expert authority).

Such scepticism of think tanks is, I would suggest, embodied in the growth of both *anti-politics* and *de-politicisation*. *Anti-politics*, on the one hand, is associated with a democratic malaise that takes expression in low voter turnout, electoral volatility, and the rise of protest votes and populist parties. *De-politicisation*, on the other hand, is a tactic usually employed by governments to deflate contentious policy issues and make them seem technical and neutral.

De-politicisation through preference-shaping and agenda-setting speaks to the establishment of a ‘dominant rationality’ and non-decision-making dynamics that systematically delete certain problems or issues from public

debate and policy consideration. Expertise—such as that commissioned from think tanks—is deployed to help entrench a certain way of ‘seeing’ and defining problems, the elaboration of ideological infrastructure and public values of such problem definition, and the development of models and methodologies to ‘manage’ problems. Accounts of the impacts of neoliberal and technocratic think tanks are often detailing this kind of *de-politicisation* tactic.

Scientisation is a related tactic of *de-politicisation* but one connected much more closely with ‘experts.’ Due to rapid technological change and scientific advances, most fields of public policy have become highly complex, requiring regular input and monitoring by trained professionals and scientific advisors. Reliance on expert consultation, evidence construction, and technocratic deliberation in local, national, and global governance, institutes ‘knowledge’ organisations as governance institutions in their own right. The arcane interests, the professional communication codes, and technocratic character of many think tanks puts them at a distance from wider society and popular concerns. Traditionally, think tanks have faced power rather than the public.

Rather than arguing that this is an inherently apolitical dynamic, in the sense of completely foreclosing dissent, epistemic power is in constant contest. There are challenges to dominant knowledge groups from norm-based groups and networks in civil society providing alternative visions of policy and engaged in the repoliticisation of neutral economic theory or policy orthodoxy. The competition of ideas is a never-ending struggle between different ‘worldviews’ and ‘regimes of truth.’ Rather than think tanks ‘speaking truth to power,’ with their primary focus upon government, in an era of anti-politics and austerity, think tanks are potentially decentred towards communities and citizenries in the construction of policy analysis. That is, they may intervene in public debates in a way that facilitates awareness and dialogue among plural sets of stakeholders to social and economic problems. Although we arrive at this point from different directions, this gradual repositioning of think tanks towards many different publics is one of the more interesting analytical insights from Marcos González Hernando.

To end on an optimistic note, think tanks are not irretrievably depoliticised as ‘scientised’ tools exploited by governments and decision-making

elites. Given their propinquity to valorise and prioritise questioning in public deliberation and critical analysis in policy debates, most think tanks remain reliable instruments for policy reflection and socio-economic analysis. Through their frequent policy positioning in order to capture the political imagination of different audiences with different interests, think tanks resonate with a range of intellectual and institutional transformations.

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Marcos González Hernando

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Abbreviations

AFPX	American Friends of Policy Exchange (PX)
ASI	Adam Smith Institute (UK)
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (UK)
BoE	Bank of England (UK)
CASE	Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion (UK)
CEP	Centre for Economic Performance (UK)
CESifo	Center for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute Group (Germany)
CFM	Centre for Macroeconomics (UK)
CFR	Council of Foreign Relations (USA)
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies (UK)
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice (UK)
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (UK)
DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions (UK)
ECB	European Central Bank
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council (UK)
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute (Ireland)
EUROFRAME	European Forecasting Research Association for the Macroeconomy
FES	Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (Germany)

FSA	Financial Services Authority (UK)
FT	<i>Financial Times</i>
GND	Green New Deal (NEF)
HECSU	Higher Education Careers Service Unit (UK)
HPI	Happy Planet Index (NEF)
ICB	Independent Commission on Banking (UK)
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs (UK)
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies (UK)
INET	Institute for New Economic Thinking (USA)
IZA	Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit (Germany)
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research (UK)
JRF	Joseph Rowntree Foundation (UK)
LLAKES	Centre for Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (UK)
LSX	London Stock Exchange (UK)
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament (UK)
MPC	Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (UK)
NAO	National Audit Office (UK)
NBER	National Economic Research Bureau (USA)
NCPA	National Center for Policy Analysis (USA)
NEF	New Economics Foundation (UK)
NEON	New Economics Research Network (NEF)
NESTA	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (UK)
NHS	National Health Service (UK)
NIER	National Institute Economic Review (NIESR)
NIESR	National Institute of Economic and Social Research (UK)
NiGEM	National Institute Global Econometric Model (NIESR)
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility (UK)
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (UK)
PRIME	Policy Research in Macroeconomics (UK)
PSI	Policy Studies Institute (UK)
PX	Policy Exchange (UK)
QE	Quantitative Easing
RSA	Royal Society of Arts (UK)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Germany)

SROI	Social Return on Investment (NEF)
SSRC	Social Science Research Council (UK)
TNG	The Next Generation (ASI)
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
TUC	Trades Union Congress (UK)
WIIW	Wiener Institut für Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (Austria)
WZB	Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (Germany)

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