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# What Is a Think Tank? A French Perspective

Thierry DE MONTBRIAL  
Thomas GOMART

The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit foundation according to the decree of November 16, 2022. As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

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#### **Ifri**

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: [accueil@ifri.org](mailto:accueil@ifri.org)

**Website:** [ifri.org](http://ifri.org)

# Authors

**Thierry de Montbrial**, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri.

He founded Ifri in 1979, as well as the World Policy Conference in 2008; two institutions which he chairs. He has been a member of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences since 1992.

Among his publications:

- ▀ *Action and Reaction in the World System: The Dynamics of Economic and Political Power*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013.
- ▀ *Living in Troubled Times: A New Political Era*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2019.

**Thomas Gomart**, Director of Ifri.

He joined Ifri in 2004 and was the Director of the Russia/NIS Center from 2004 to 2013. He then became Director of the Strategic Development from 2010 to 2015. Since 2015, he is the Director of Ifri.

Among his publications:

- ▀ *L'Affolement du monde. 10 enjeux géopolitiques*, Paris: Tallandier, 2019;
- ▀ *Notre intérêt national. Quelle politique étrangère pour la France ?*, with Thierry de Montbrial, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2017.

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# Introduction

**Thierry de Montbrial**

The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the spring of 2019, in a completely different environment to when it was founded, which was dominated by the competition between the two “superpowers” of the time, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). It is expected that the world in the coming decades will mainly be marked by competition between the United States, which does not intend to give up its primacy, and China, which openly asserts its ambition to surpass the United States before the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the USSR was unable to adapt to the technological revolution, China excels in this and seems to be on track to soon gain access to all the attributes of what is meant by a superpower.

The international system is evolving towards a new configuration that, however, it would be wrong to describe as bipolar, like the Cold War era, because of its extreme complexity, as demonstrated, for example, by the difficult concept of cyberpower. The risk of the nuclear apocalypse, which mainly occupied the best strategists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been supplanted by a wide variety of more diverse and diffuse risks, for some large-scale, in the political as in the economic order. In some respects, the situation is rather reminiscent of the aftermath of the First World War when Chatham House and the Council on Foreign Relations were founded, two major institutions that served as models for us in 1979 and will soon celebrate their centenaries.

For a century, and especially since the Second World War, the landscape of what are now called think tanks has significantly changed and expanded. Clearly, the naive hopes of an international system subject to the law and methods of peaceful conflict resolution with the help of facilitating institutions have been disappointed. Furthermore, the academic world has gradually taken over at least part of the analysis and forecasting activity, which was initially the first distinctive feature of think tanks and the media does not lack talented journalists who also work in the same field. In addition, some think tanks are politically partisan and others not, some advocate for the public interest and others rather belong to lobbies or to communication companies, etc. Furthermore, the positioning of think tanks is not the same in liberal democracies or in authoritarian countries.

Insofar as think tanks in the world form a community committed to promoting a sustainable new world order in the long term, which remains to be ascertained, we can at least assert that their task is significantly more difficult than that of their founding fathers, at least as they conceived it. This is why, on the occasion of its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Ifri is proposing to its peers to devote some joint effort on reflecting on the relevance of our profession, which firstly begins with identifying it correctly and specifying our working methods. The four papers in this issue are only an initial contribution in this respect.

# What is a think tank?

**Thierry de Montbrial**

When I was laying the foundations for the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri)<sup>1</sup> in 1978 and 1979, only a select few in France were familiar with the English term “think tank” and had at least an approximate idea of what it covered.

This term has become fashionable but still has no consensual definition.

In line with the underlying roots of the phenomenon, I regard a think tank as any open organization built around a permanent cadre of researchers or experts, whose mission it is to develop, on an objective basis, syntheses and ideas relevant to policy-making or the formulation of private or public strategies, subscribing to a perspective of public interest. Clearly, this is a radical and, therefore, idealistic definition, but one that allows us to examine real institutions that are considered, or consider themselves, as think tanks.

The criterion of openness to the public is an essential distinction between contemporary think tanks and advisors to heads of non-democratic states, either of times gone by (such as the secret cabinet of Louis XV), or of today. Openness implies debate with the outside world. Naturally, openness can be achieved to a greater or lesser extent.

As an organization, a think tank can be public or private and can have corporate status, typically as an association or foundation.

An administration inherently lacks the same breadth of expression as a private institution, and yet certain public think tanks can enjoy a large margin of independence and openness. By contrast, being private does not, by rights, guarantee independence and openness. The statutory conditions (internal governance) and the diversification of funding, tried and tested over a long period of time, are the essential factors in this regard. Equally important are the culture of the organization, also created over the course

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This text is a revised translation of a speech Thierry de Montbrial delivered at the Académie des sciences morales et politiques in Paris on February 28, 2011.

1. In French: Institut français des relations internationales.

of decades, and the reputation and integrity of its leaders. Here, as elsewhere, time is a crucial factor in obtaining a reputation.

All institutions must be placed in context. The Soviet Union, partly inspired by the American example and with the encouragement of the Academy of Sciences, created important think tanks such as Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), the Institute for the United States and Canada, and many specialized centers, typically organized broadly along regional lines. Their objectives, sometimes contradictory, were to make objective analyses and predictions about the outside world, to develop relationships with their foreign counterparts, to inform and advise the Party, but also to publish many forms of analysis and/or propaganda.

It was through these institutions that I made my first forays into the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s. There I was struck by the quality and competence of many of those I spoke to, increasingly stifled over time by the painfully large gap between reality and ideology. Hundreds of researchers from the major Soviet think tanks contributed to the transformation of Russia in the years following the collapse of the system, precisely because they had a genuine opening to the world.

Although equally endowed with think tanks, Maoist China was less inclined towards interaction with the outside world than the USSR under Brezhnev and his ephemeral successors. Things changed under Deng Xiaoping. I will limit myself to one example: the CICIR which, in September 2010, celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary with much pomp. CICIR is the acronym for China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations; institutes, because CICIR is, in effect, a conglomerate of interdependent institutions, each specialized in a particular aspect of international relations.

CICIR, like other think tanks based in Beijing or Shanghai, plays a similar role to that of its bygone Soviet counterparts, but clearly in a markedly different and fundamentally freer context. Its importance is increased by China finding itself, for the first time in its history, needing to create a meaningful foreign policy on a global scale.

Let us return to the definition of a think tank, as an organization built around its researchers. It's a key point that differentiates the think tank from other forms of 'ideas societies' such as the Fabian Society (created in London in 1884 to promote social reforms) or the more or less structured political or economic salons and clubs inherited from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

These researchers are not necessarily researchers for life. In the American system, the same person can alternate between being a researcher in a think tank and an actor at the heart of a Presidential administration. This coming and going offers them invaluable experience, which contributes to the distinction of a think tank from a purely academic university tradition. But, as a researcher, each individual must show an



aptitude to treat his or her subject with proven methods, borrowed from the human and social sciences, sometimes even the natural sciences. Only thus can they advocate ideas or courses of action on a reasonably objective basis and separate themselves from pure ideology or propaganda.

I also insist on the fact that, in the original sense, a true think tank must rely on a *permanent cadre* of researchers. By that, I mean researchers whose work in the think tank constitutes their primary activity and who can thus conceive and realize substantial projects through eventual collaboration with associate researchers, that is to say, outsiders. For many, the international reputation of a think tank rests largely upon its capacity to permanently maintain such a qualitatively solid research cadre.

I have highlighted above the importance of the *method* in all research activity. Think tanks, by nature, look to the future. Their activity, therefore, mainly focuses on the prospective and strategic: they are *policy-oriented*. An inherent difficulty of their work is that their analyses and recommendations must be based on a deep understanding of the present and thus of the past, without which they run the risk of committing huge errors of judgment; but at the same time, their spirit must be sufficiently open and enlightened, free of any dogma or narrow thinking, to allow them to identify early signs of change, without succumbing to extrapolation or missing the key turning points.

The two aspects are otherwise complementary. In the 1970s, economic development theories based on the notion of technology transfer neglected the cultural dimensions of mastering the technologies and thus, led nowhere. In a similar vein, the Shah's admirers had not sufficiently analyzed the state of Iranian society, nor correctly interpreted the "weak signals" that announced the possibility of a revolution.

In 2010-2011, was the Euro crisis, or indeed the fall of the regimes of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, predictable or indeed statistically calculable? How should we set about thinking about the future of other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East or in Asia (North Korea)?

I could easily give more examples, but the important point is to see that the answer to any question of this type depends on a more or less explicit contextual background, specific to the think tank, upon which more or less subtle influences can play a role, over and above the basic necessities of which I have already spoken.

A particularly interesting aspect of this question is the possible interaction between predicting an event and its realization, an interaction that depends on the nature and the position (in the geopolitical sense of the German *die Lage*) of the institution that makes the prediction. Making recourse to analogy, I would say that, here, there is a type of Heisenbergian uncertainty. These observations bring us back to the importance of the

diversity and, thus, pluralism of think tanks, in which we can also see a democratic requirement.

Another comment on the definition. Think tanks engage in private (typically business) or public (typically states or international organizations) policies and strategies, but it is their duty to always maintain a perspective of public interest. Whatever its composition (which is always pluralistic), the public interest can never be reduced to an alliance of private interests. In this regard, think tanks differ from institutions such as consultancies, communication groups or pressure groups, whose job it is to promote and defend their particular interests. In principle, the distinction is radical, but it can be subtler in practice. Lobbyists often claim to work for the public interest: as they used to say, what is good for General Motors is good for the United States. But their real perspective is the same as that of their clients. As for think tanks, they are sometimes forced to refuse certain potential partners, for reasons of incompatibility with their vision of public interest. In any case, it is necessary to talk about the vision of public interest. The implied position is that public interest is not determined by one opinion. In a democratic system, think tanks must, therefore, contribute to its definition. On this level, there is a need for truly ideological and pluralistic debates.

With globalization, global governance has gradually imposed itself as a central theme for the big international think tanks. Due to the qualitative transformation of interdependence caused by the revolution in information and communications technology, a shock or disturbance to a particular segment of the international system – functional or regional – can destabilize the entirety of the system (chaos theory, known colloquially as the “butterfly effect”), in the same way, that, in the human body, an injury affecting a critical function can lead to death.

This creates a need to constantly adapt the means of regulation at all levels and to ensure global coordination. Thus, we can conceptualize the problem of global governance in an integrated manner. This problem is more arduous than the organization and running of a business, an initial basis for comparison, because the world does not exist as a political unit. No leader, no institution exists to define the objectives and strategies of ‘the world’. For most of the concrete subjects related to global governance – such as energy, climate, food, water, health and, indeed, security, macroeconomics and finance – the main partners are, to varying degrees, a combination of states and businesses.

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Some think tanks are openly involved in ideological confrontation. I will cite the examples of the Heritage Foundation, founded in 1973, and the Hoover Institution, established in 1919 but radically remodeled between 1960 and 1989. These two institutions are convinced of the idea of the

absolute supremacy of the American model in its conservative form and of the need to protect against liberal influence.

However, most American think tanks have more operational objectives, even if they are not immune to an ideological background (such as monetarist or Keynesian, in the field of economics). They raise issues – such as non-proliferation or elimination of nuclear weapons, ethnic coexistence, climate change, energy, water, agricultural revolutions, etc. – analyze them and present diverse options to resolve them. In that sense, they are loyal to national tradition, in the Tocquevillian sense.

As examples, I will mention three institutions from different times. The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) was created in 1920 to bring convergence between the closed world of university economists and the world of government and economic policy. It was at the NBER that Simon Kuznets (Nobel prize winner in 1971) completed his pioneering work on national accounting, and Milton Friedman (Nobel prize winner in 1976) did his research on the demand for money.

Second example: the Brookings Institution, Washington's oldest think tank. Although it is not the largest, it is today considered the number one in the United States and, by extension, the world. Founded at the time of the First World War by Robert S. Brookings, a Saint Louis businessman aged 70, the institution was built around the idea that, to be effective, public policies needed to be based on a solid factual foundation, which was at the time completely absent. Today, the Brookings, as it is colloquially known, stands on three pillars (still working on public policy): the economy and internal issues, national and international security, and international relations.

Third example: in 1981, at the start of the phenomenon that we now call globalization, Fred Bergsten founded the Institute for International Economics – later renamed the Peterson Institute after its principal donor – which is today considered the number one think tank in the world dedicated to public policy in the economic domain.

Such institutions seek to be practical and objective in their work, which – as I have already said – does not necessarily mean they are immune to any ideological background, intended or unintended. I am among those who believe that what Max Weber called *Wertfreiheit* – one could call it axiological independence – is an ideal that can only be approached in social and human sciences, natural or applied. Everything is a matter of degree and personal relationship to the truth. To talk about this subject in depth would side-track me too much.

Let us pause at the origin of the term “think tank”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “think tank” was a slang term used to refer to the brain at the turn of the last century. Military jargon took it over, perhaps after the First World War and especially during the Second, to

mean a secure place to discuss plans and strategies. In the 1950s, it was used freely to refer to research organizations contracted to the military, the most important being the Rand Corporation.

The use of the word grew at the start of the 1960s, when public attention focused on the “whiz kids” in the Pentagon; that is, the experts surrounding Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense named by John Kennedy. Many of these experts came from the Rand. The later increase in the number of more or less comparable institutions led to greater use of the term, first in the United States and then outside, with globalization.

In the history of think tanks, the Rand Corporation occupies a special space. Founded in 1948 by the US Air Force, mostly for its own needs, this institution – whose acronym means “Research and Development” – now represents something of a colossus, with a thousand employees near its original site in Santa Monica, California, and around five hundred in Washington, D.C.

After the Second World War and the deployment of the new atomic weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it might have seemed that large-scale aviation (both aircraft and missiles) would become the decisive weapon in future wars. On the strength of this assumption, the Rand took on mathematicians, physicists and engineers for whom politics needed to be a rational activity, able to be broken down into problems that scientific method could analyze and solve. We can say without exaggeration that this paradigm was a major, if not dominant influence on the American government until the fiasco of the Vietnam War.

It was the Rand Corporation that was the brain behind the nuclear strategy in the 1950s and 1960s, and, if there is an institution that truly deserves the name “think tank”, it is the Rand. It was also very active at the start of the 1980s, with the launch of President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly called “Star Wars”. Although this project never came to light in its original form, it is generally agreed that, by dragging the Soviet Union into a qualitative arms race that it could not maintain, the SDI contributed to its downfall.

With the increased risks of nuclear proliferation and the polarization of attention on Iran and North Korea, American think tanks and their offshoots have once again turned their interest to the development and deployment of antimissile systems, the major challenge of the SDI. George W. Bush made this his warhorse during his eight-year Presidency, and, in this matter, his influence was powerful enough to turn it into the centerpiece of the new NATO concept, adopted in Lisbon in November 2010. To go into details would necessitate tracing the history of NATO since the fall of the USSR.

The example of the Rand shows the major influence of defense in the emergence of what are now called second-generation think tanks, during the Cold War. More generally, the American desire, unchanged since the Second World War, to increase its qualitative and quantitative lead in weapons systems, has continued to act as a catalyst for technological innovations that have nourished the economy as a whole.

This role is visible in many industries, particularly the information-processing industry. The computer science of the 1950s and 1960s has gradually become information technology, the lexical shift representing the gradual movement of the center of gravity away from hardware and towards software. The Rand also played a role in the birth of Arpanet, and thus the Internet.

In short, no think tank has ever been, nor probably ever will be, as influential as the Rand Corporation was during the Cold War.

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It is not only in think tanks and technology that the military agenda left its mark. General Marshall, US Secretary of State between 1947 and 1949, introduced the concept of planning into the Department of State with the creation of a body called the Policy Planning Staff (PPS), intended to bring coherence and greater foresight to the making of American foreign policy. He placed the PPS under the management of George Kennan, undoubtedly the most profound-thinking diplomat of his generation. It was there that the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty were conceived. One of the natural roles of the PPS was to edit the Secretary of State's speeches or those made in his name.

Another post-war institution, the National Security Council (NSC), reporting directly to the President, coordinates all the actions of the executive that are relevant to national security. Initially relatively modest, the NSC has grown progressively. The most illustrious National Security Adviser, appointed in 1968, was Henry Kissinger, who eclipsed his rivals in the government. Richard Nixon named him Secretary of State in 1973.

That was the year in which Michel Jobert, President Pompidou's Foreign Affairs Minister, wished to endow his ministry with a think tank. His modest goal was to throw a bit of itching powder at the diplomatic corps... Drawing on our experience at the Rand Corporation and the University of California at Berkeley, respectively, Jean-Louis Gergorin and I suggested to him that he create a service inspired by the Policy Planning Staff. We suggested to him the less ambitious name – and therefore one less provocative to the old guard at the Quai d'Orsay – of *Centre d'Analyse et Prévision* (CAP). The CAP was renamed the *Direction de la Prospective* in 2009.

Between 1973 and 1979, as the CAP's first director, I dedicated myself to creating a true think tank for the benefit of the Foreign Affairs Minister, and also for the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, with

which we maintained a direct link, and to developing what I called an “intellectual diplomacy”.

On the first point, Michel Jobert and his successors (Jean Sauvagnargues and Louis de Guiringaud) gave us real freedom of thought, with the agreement of the Presidency. We had a great deal of liberty to publish articles and speak publicly – and thus a substantial degree of independence and openness.

There were, of course, a few exceptions. We were initially prohibited from reflecting on the Common Agricultural Policy. In the politico-military sphere, our work on the concept of widespread deterrence and our contacts – particularly with the colleagues of Lord Carrington, the British Defence Minister – were bound to total confidentiality. The outcome of that work was, however, visible after the Military Planning Law of 1976.

Another example: when I was an official guest in Israel in 1978, I was forbidden to visit the Golan Heights. But I took the risk of disobedience and was glad to have done so, for nothing compares to visits on the ground to understand geopolitics or geo-strategy.

Throughout these years, the CAP’s work was dominated by the different facets of the energy crisis, whose beginnings we had analyzed in the spring of 1973 under the theme of the new international economic order that followed the quadrupling of the price of oil, or indeed by the evolution of Eastern countries and politico-military affairs.

I have already mentioned the question of deterrence. I should also mention the major reorientation of the French position towards nuclear proliferation (which only led much later – in 1992 – to France signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty).

As for the economy, we did not yet speak of governance or globalization; rather, the International Monetary System (Bretton Woods’ system had perished in 1971), the volatility of primary resource markets, protectionism and multilateral commercial questions were (already!) our greatest concerns.

In intellectual agreement with Raymond Barre, appointed Prime Minister in 1976 and who received me regularly, we considered the idea of an “organized liberalism” (*libéralisme organisé*) while rejecting the prevailing Marxist models and the pure, hard-line liberal paradigm, which had taken hold in the United States and Germany.

In Europe, we looked into the consequences of the collapse of the last authoritarian regimes (Franco and Salazar) and took an interest in the perceptible movements in Eastern Europe. The phenomenon of Eurocommunism demanded all of our attention. We worked on Asia, particularly Japan and China, after the downfall of the Gang of Four.



As for “intellectual diplomacy”, it manifested itself naturally in our relations with our counterparts, mostly but not exclusively Western. Our links to the PPS of the US Department of State were particularly close in the Kissinger period. We participated in multilateral meetings such as the Atlantic Alliance planning group. We inserted ourselves into influential organizations where France was under-represented, such as the Bilderberg Group or the Trilateral Commission.

I particularly remember, in this latter group, verbally sparring on the concept of organized liberalism with Otto Graf Lambsdorff, the brilliant liberal Minister of Economics for the Federal Republic of Germany. We thus left the exclusively French environment and international relations ‘among ourselves’, and took the risk of presenting our ideas to the outside world and debating them. More generally, “intellectual diplomacy” manifested itself in our exchanges with major foreign think tanks, particularly American, British, German and Soviet, and through the relations we maintained with research centers in many countries. Thus, we introduced in France the practice known to Americans as “track 2 diplomacy”, which is comparable to the most structured manifestation of “intellectual diplomacy”. We also dedicated ourselves, at the purely French level, to establishing links beyond our partisan divisions, which was not at all an obvious step in the intolerant environment of the 1970s.

The CAP was able to exercise its influence thanks to its freedom of contacts and its access to the heart of the State, its right to attend many high-level government meetings and to choose where it distributed its publications. At every election, we would prepare what we called an *aide mémoire au roi* (AMR) for the incoming minister, a sort of review of France’s major international interests.

Since the 1970s, the CAP experienced highs and lows, but is now well and truly a part of the French administrative landscape. Essentially, it built upon the foundations that we had laid in the first years, through which I discovered the world of think tanks, still unknown to the French elite. That was when I discovered my desire to build an institution in France comparable to the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York or Chatham House in the UK. It would become Ifri.

But before talking about that, I should briefly return to the origin of think tanks before the term was used and mention the circumstances following the Great War. The American mentality of the time was to attribute the cataclysm to fundamental flaws in the international system and, therefore, to want to change the system itself. In that spirit, two large private and independent institutions were created almost simultaneously: one in 1921 in New York, the Council on Foreign Relations; the other in 1920 in London, the Royal Institute for International Affairs (RIIA), now commonly known as Chatham House.

These two institutions, which correspond perfectly with my definition of a think tank, targeted similar goals from the outset: objectively analyze international situations; create ways to peacefully resolve conflicts; organize debates on related issues, involving actors, analysts and observers; and contribute to public education on international relations.

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I will not attempt here to trace Ifri's rich history. I will instead try to describe its current characteristics, and to use its example to make a few broader observations.

Ifri's missions seek to follow those of its American/British older brothers at their inception:

- ▀ to objectively analyze, in a prospective way, international political and economic situations – regional and functional;
- ▀ to contribute to the development of means of government that reinforce the structural stability of the international system (I will come back to this notion of structural stability in greater detail);
- ▀ from there, to help public and private actors – particularly businesses – to create their own international strategies;
- ▀ and to participate at all levels in debates on these subjects in France, Europe and the world.

To accomplish its missions, Ifri currently has around sixty permanent staff, of whom half are researchers and half support staff. These researchers are accompanied, according to their needs, by external associate researchers.

The researchers are divided between centers and programs. Ideally, a researcher at Ifri should be familiar with the domain in which his work has an influence, know the relevant networks and the main actors, and make an identifiable contribution, in France and the world, to the debates surrounding their subject.

The researchers are peer-reviewed, as far as their publications are concerned. Ifri management also assesses their managerial qualities (their ability to lead a team or identify and secure funding). Our difference from academic research comes mainly in the audience for our work, beyond the researchers' peers.

Like its main global counterparts, Ifri must reach targets that are found in what I call "decision-making factories". It must also directly address members of the public who are interested in major international issues.

The compatibility of these two targets is not apparent, from the point of view of either methodology or time management. The former target group seeks confidentiality, the latter widespread publication. To work



towards public interest, which is inherent to a think tank's quality, necessitates finding a balance.

Beyond appearances in the written or audiovisual media, which are but a marginal activity for an institution founded on the quality of its research, Ifri reaches its targets or its partners by distributing publications or organizing debates. The French public is familiar with the annual report *Ramsès*, whose 30<sup>th</sup> edition was published in September 2011 and which has become the leader in its field. Specialists also know the quarterly review *Politique étrangère* ("Foreign Policy"), which was started in 1936 by the Centre d'études de politique étrangère (CEPE or "Centre for Foreign Policy Studies") and whose continuity is assured by Ifri.

The Institute publishes, or participates in the publication of, books and reports resulting often from shared projects with foreign personalities or counterparts. Increasingly, Ifri distributes electronically its notes on very specific subjects. As far as possible, these publications are distributed in two or three languages, which is the only way to maintain a presence in the global intellectual debate.

The use of digital technology leads to the conception and development of 'derivative products' targeting audiences that were previously difficult to access. But the extension towards these audiences must be compatible with preserving existing relationships with decision-makers and opinion leaders, who are at the center of Ifri's *raison d'être*.

The Institute organizes around two hundred debates a year, which range from international conferences based on specialists, to low-key dinner debates, convened under the Chatham House Rule to allow economic and political figures as well as opinion leaders to engage in dialogue with high-level decision-makers (heads of state or government, CEOs of large multinationals, etc.).

Much as journalism is not Ifri's primary vocation, these dinner debates (or other meetings of the same type) do not follow the same logic as events organized by communication agencies or lobbyists, whose job is fundamentally different from that of think tanks. It is Ifri's job to promote mutual understanding through in-depth and informal dialogue, which implies respect for the confidentiality of debate. More generally, Ifri organizes specialist meetings for its major partners in order to fulfill its advisory role while always being mindful of its public interest vocation.

Having thus defined in broad terms Ifri's missions and productions, I should talk now about its structure. Any serious study of a particular think tank must examine in detail three essential questions:

- ▀ (1) its legal structures and its governance, in theory and in practice;
- ▀ (2) its financing;
- ▀ and (3) its culture and, therefore, its history.

I cannot conceive of how to conduct a comprehensive study of think tanks without an in-depth comparative examination of these three aspects.

Ifri is an association, according to the 1901 law, recognized as being for the public benefit, counting around 430 individual members and over one hundred corporate bodies – mostly businesses (60) and embassies (60). It is led by a Board of Directors composed of between 18 and 24 members, hired for their abilities in the areas dealt with by the Institute and for their commitment to defending its independence.

The board convenes four times a year and works according to strict rules of governance. The president, appointed by the board, prepares and executes the budget. He works within the authority granted to him. Ifri's operations are subject to two checks: private, an annual certification by an account commissioner, and public, a regular examination by the Court of Auditors.

Recently, the Institute decided to professionalize its management, introducing measures comparable to those found in the business world. I am convinced that such a professionalization is a necessary condition – which is not to say a sufficient one – to ensuring the longevity of the Institute. The work of the Board of Directors is completed by a Strategic Council, in communication with the general management, which more specifically deals with the different aspects of research policy.

The question of financing is dealt with in a similar way to the membership of the Board of Directors. In 2010, Ifri's turnover increased to nearly 6.7 million euros. As a percentage, the contribution of the French government represents around 27%, in the form of an allowance in the Prime Minister's budget (and not that of the Foreign Minister, as is often thought), and voted upon by Parliament. Since 2005, this subsidy has been subject to an agreement with the government. This agreement lays out in broad terms the Institute's missions of public interest and confirms its independence.

The contributions of its members represent around 16% of Ifri's income. These come mostly from businesses, among which are a growing number of SMEs. The rest include financing and donations, dedicated or otherwise, to research programs and other specific activities, such as the organization of conferences. The important point is that no individual payment exceeds 300,000 euros, i.e. less than 5% of the Institute's total budget. Most are far more modest.

Moreover, Ifri's management scrupulously ensures that none of these donations comes with conditions, explicit or implicit, that might endanger the principle of independence. This requirement has more than once led to IFRI rejecting opportunities that were otherwise very tempting.

I will add that, since 1995, the Institute has owned its office building, financed entirely at the time by a private fundraising campaign for an amount equivalent to around 12 million euros. Then, as of now, this campaign was run in a way that ensured independence.

Without good governance and without healthy, solid and balanced financing, independence is an empty word. But these two necessary conditions are not in themselves sufficient. An institution's identity is anchored in its culture and therefore in its history. In the final equation, independence is a state of mind. Ifri has no political affiliation and has never strayed from that line, which is also proven by the composition of its Board of Directors.

Researchers are recruited overwhelmingly on the basis of their abilities, but also according to their sense of responsibility, for their opinions gain greater impact by being expressed at Ifri. It is as if the Institute were giving them a loudspeaker. They share certain fundamental values, such as moral integrity and the desire to achieve objectivity, but also to add a building block to regional or global governance that is more respectful of individuals and peoples. In this quest, they do not underestimate the benefits of structural stability, in other words, the harnessing of reforms, in which failure leads to decline or chaos. Nor are they apostles of "*droit de l'hommisme*" [human rights-ism], according to Hubert Védrine's famous expression, nor do they wage crusades for or against a particular country, regime or cause. And if they are generally committed to European development, for example, it is through reason rather than militancy. In a word, Ifri's work subscribes to long-term idealism and short-term realism.

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I will conclude by openly expressing a dream for a new think tank, which would have as its mission to observe and dissect all other think tanks according to objective criteria and place them in the general movement of the marketplace of ideas. A Pennsylvania University professor, James Mc Gann, 2007 began a global annual ranking of think tanks based not on concrete facts but on opinion polls. Ifri cannot complain, because it comes out as the top think tank in France, the third in Europe and the only French think tank appearing in the global hierarchy. All that is left is to fine-tune the methodology of this ranking, or rather these rankings. In addition, anglophone institutions are evidently at an advantage.

A think tank about think tanks would clearly consider the characteristics that differentiate them from other institutions. As they become more complex, political units need time for critical self-reflection, as independent as possible from their classical institutions. By classical institutions, I mean all kinds of organizations (for example, administrations, central banks, universities, etc.) in charge of the internal and external functioning of these units.

The think tank paradox is that, to exercise the influence that is their *raison d'être* without falling into short-term quasi-journalistic commentary, they must themselves exist as tangible institutions, but institutions of a peculiar type as they are stripped of all *explicit* responsibility in the running of public or private affairs. Their social interest is a product of their freedom of analysis and thought, which only such a disconnection allows. In their role as decision enablers, think tanks also distinguish themselves from other professional public or private consultants, whose intellectual openness is, by nature, restricted.

Since the world is nowhere near ready to become a single political unit, think tanks would be left in the void if they did not subscribe to a specific social context; for most of those mentioned here, the state, or a community of experts (for example, the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London was originally in favor of the Atlantic Alliance), is their context.

Just as there are few truly “global” businesses in the current state of affairs, so too are all think tanks rooted in a particular cultural environment, which gives them their stature and defines their boundaries. Hence the importance, in this era of globalization, of a large, diverse and interactive ensemble of think tanks. By their nature, these institutions are well placed to play a part in the cross-fertilization of cultures, and give meaning to the vague and stilted idea of the “dialogue of civilizations”. In the same way, the world of think tanks can act as an embryonic global civil society and, thus, a major aspect of the extension of democracy.

In order for this optimistic vision to be realized, the liberal spirit must spread; that is to say, the material and spiritual conditions in which true think tanks might blossom – which requires them to have a vision beyond their individual interests – must be brought together. This is yet a distant goal. Even in a country such as France, the economic or political viability of think tanks worthy of the name is uncertain. The risk, therefore, is that actors dominated by specific interests or questionable ideologies might impose themselves on the ideas markets, with the pretension of upholding a think tank’s quality.

Progress is a double-edged sword. To trust in mankind is to believe that the positive edge will eventually prevail. Let us suppose then that the think tank phenomenon, which was formed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, will flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> and, with the help of information and communications technology, will play a crucial role in the creation of a more equal, more just and more peaceful global society.

# Think thank à la française

Thierry de Montbrial and Thomas Gomart

In France, using the term “think tanks” would be tantamount to “intellectual import-export”, insofar as the international circulation of ideas would be the place of various forms of nationalism and imperialism.<sup>1</sup> The term “think tank”, imported from the United States, is not currently covered by any consensual definition. Think tanks remain relatively unknown in France. In Washington, they play a full-fledged role in public life and have their roots in vibrant associative democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville said: “Wherever, at the head of some new undertaking, you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.”<sup>2</sup> In the very specific field of foreign policy, think tanks have gained strong legitimacy in a two-pronged movement: they are representatives of civil society and are acknowledged as such by the federal government, and contribute directly to the United States’ presence on the world stage. There is nothing like this in France, where some could still ask: Do you really think we can talk about French “think tanks”?<sup>3</sup>

To answer this question, we need to compare the situation between the United States and France, even if the proliferation of think tanks is now an international phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> There are currently more than 6,500 think tanks worldwide. Of these, 1,815 are in the United States and 176 in France.<sup>5</sup> Placed against this three-layered background – encompassing France,

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1. P. Bourdieu, “Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Vol. 145, December 2002, p. 3.

2. A. de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1961, t. II, p. 155.

3. Quoted in L. Desmoulin, “Profits symboliques et identité(s) : les think tanks entre affirmation et dénégation”, *Quaderni*, No. 70, 2009, p. 13.

4. F. Vergiolle de Chantal, “La recherche indépendante aux États-Unis et en France : le Council on Foreign Relations et l’Ifri”, *Quaderni*, No. 70, 2009, pp. 49-56; K. Brookes and B. Le Pendeven, “L’État innovant (1) : renforcer les think tanks”, Fondation pour l’innovation politique, April 2014, pp. 7-8.

5. J. Mc Gann, “Global Trends in Think Tanks and Policy Advice”, Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, International Relations Program, University of Pennsylvania, 2012. This figure continues to rise, and includes both the think tanks devoted to international issues and those focused on domestic issues. They are present in 182 countries, split as follows: 29% in North America, 26% in Europe, 23% in Asia-Pacific, 10% in Latin America, 7% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 5% in the Maghreb and Middle East. Note that these percentages have been slightly weighted to correct a calculation error in the initial data.

America and the global situation – the relevance of French-style think tanks becomes clear. There are approximately 600 think tanks devoted to international and security issues. This segment is the most sensitive; it underpins the phenomenon and affects sovereign issues and, thus, the various forms of intellectual nationalism and imperialism. These think tanks play a direct role in the globalization of ideas and their regional or national variations.<sup>6</sup> They intervene before and after a myriad of research projects and debates, thus marking the boundaries of their own specific field, a field on which they cooperate and compete.

Globally, think tanks form a small “industry”, taken as a sector of activity in its own right. Within it, there are a number of French players who define a think tank as follows: “any open organization built around a permanent cadre of researchers or experts, whose mission it is to develop, on an objective basis, syntheses and ideas relevant to policy-making or the formulation of private or public strategies, subscribing to a perspective of public interest”.<sup>7</sup> This definition suggests that there is a clear distinction between think tanks, political clubs and professional circles. In practice, confusion has arisen between “formal” institutions and “informal” clubs of every kind, regardless of their size, missions and legal or financial structures. This trend towards dilution is a global one.

This article has three objectives. Firstly, it aims to put this definition into perspective, not in an inclusive or exclusive way, but by emphasizing the importance of context, and particularly historical context. This is a point often overlooked in the abundant academic literature on think tanks. Secondly, it outlines the contours of the profession of “think tanker”, which is exercised according to production rules and a social framework whose interactions must be clearly understood. This dimension is also often ignored, which would partially explain the skepticism that seems to prevail towards French-style think tanks. Finally, it explores the links between think tanks and civil society. Anyone who believes in the power of mobilization and engagement of civil societies, regardless of the political regime, cannot afford to overlook think tanks, the potential seeds of a responsible global civil society.

## Four generations of think tanks

The success of think tanks reflects and promotes an American/British approach to international affairs. With hindsight, we can break their history down into four successive generations. During the first period (1919-1945), different institutes appeared, and some of them became large institutions that were later assimilated to think tanks. The Second World War favored

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6. D. Abelson, “Old World, New World: The Evolution and Influence of Foreign Affairs Think Tanks”, *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2014, pp. 125-142.

7. See in this study, T. de Montbrial, “What is a think tank?”, pp. 6-19.



the institutionalization of American and British think tanks because of their contribution to the war effort. The second generation came with the Cold War which, due to ideological competition, encouraged the development of institutes within the blocs. Working methods and links with the military then popularized the term “think tank”. The third generation (1989-2008) came when the number of think tanks multiplied worldwide, and particularly in Europe. The fourth generation is still in its infancy, and intends to play a direct or indirect role in the efforts towards global governance. Let us focus on the first generation for an understanding of the American/British origins of the phenomenon.

### ***A couple of offspring from the First World War***

The foundation of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London in July 1920 and of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York in July 1921 are closely linked. In the framework of the Paris Conference, British and American delegates met to lay the foundations for an Anglo-American institute that would prevent another war. Unusually, external expertise was invited to contribute to the conference.<sup>8</sup> The project did not lead to a joint structure, but both institutes succeeded in building relationships of trust with the Department of State and the Foreign Office. Chatham House and the CFR soon came to symbolize the “special relationship” between the US and the UK by conveying a concept of the international system that combined idealism and balance of power.<sup>9</sup>

Chatham House and the CFR were founded by men who trained during the years when the balance of power between the United Kingdom and the United States was reversed. They had witnessed heavy urbanization, rapid industrialization, waves of migration, and fierce competition among the major powers. These founding fathers were also marked by the rise of the Evangelical Church, Darwin’s theses, the cult of virility, scientism, and a strong faith in political liberalism.<sup>10</sup> Sociologically, the founders of Chatham and the CFR belonged to a social elite, drawn from the best schools and prestigious universities. They never thought of themselves as opponents of the established order, but rather as enlightened supporters of legitimately installed powers and respected members of the establishment. Intellectually, these early think tankers placed an emphasis on the historical method from an international and pragmatic perspective, built on states

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8. M. Macmillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, London: John Murray, 2002, p. 63.

9. I. Parmar, “Anglo-American Elites in the Interwar Years: Idealism and Power in the Intellectual Roots of Chatham House and the Council on Foreign Relations”, *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2002, pp. 53-75.

10. I. Parmar, “Institutes of International Affairs: Their Roles in Foreign Policy-Making, Opinion Mobilization and Unofficial Diplomacy”, in: D. Stone and A. Denham, *Think Tank Traditions*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 21-22.

and civilizations.<sup>11</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, Director of Studies at Chatham House from 1925 to 1954, put his stamp on the world of think tanks because of the close ties he established with the Foreign Office and his extensive personal production.<sup>12</sup>

The Chatham House model quickly spread to the dominions – Canada (1928), Australia (1932), India (1936), New Zealand (1938), Pakistan (1948) and South Africa (1934) – where research institutes were established, focusing on international issues. In continental Europe, the model was adopted in Italy (1933), France (1935), with the Centre d'études de politique étrangère (CEPE or Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy), the Netherlands (1945) and Belgium (1947). The momentum resulted not only in a type of organization and a mode of intellectual production but, above all, in a form of influence and a state of mind. This, in turn, made it possible to create active socialization on international issues, customarily treated almost exclusively by the states.

Chatham House gave its name to the “Chatham House Rule”, which covers part of the activity of international think tanks.<sup>13</sup> This rule allows a form of debate specific to these organizations; it is designed to create a space for discussion that is a compromise between the openness of public discussions and the confidentiality of private meetings. It facilitates the exchange of views within a given time period, encouraging succinct forms of oral expression. It thus means that participants can be dissociated from the organization to which they belong, to encourage freedom of tone and proposal. The rule is simple, easy to observe and based on a principle of mutual trust and recognition between participants, thereby establishing a form of socialization and commentary that comes naturally in the Anglosphere... although much less for French elites!

### ***The role of foundations***

The American system of think tanks cannot be understood without looking at the philanthropic foundations. American philanthropy, the offspring of rapid industrialization, applies the main principles of Christian charity combined with a particularity that comes from Protestantism, and values personal effort and enrichment while encouraging the redistribution of a share of the accumulated wealth to the benefit of the community.<sup>14</sup>

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11. D. Stevenson, “Learning from the Past: The Relevance of International History”, *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2014, p. 21.

12. I. Hall, “Time of Troubles: Arnold J. Toynbee’s Twentieth Century”, *International Affairs*, No. 1, 2014, pp. 23-36.

13. Chatham House website (visited on January 21, 2019): “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”

14. L. Tourneux, *Sciences de l'homme et politique. Les fondations philanthropiques américaines en France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011, p. 39.



Encouraged by the state, this became “a valuable aid to American diplomacy”.<sup>15</sup> Three foundations have provided crucial support to think tanks in the United States, as well as in Europe and other parts of the world. The Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford foundations, dubbed the “Big Three”, played a key role in the inter-war period, and again after the Second World War, in spreading American intellectual and cultural influence abroad, and in creating transnational networks.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to them, a form of “philanthropic diplomacy” emerged, championing the development of an international elite of knowledge and power designed to rationally steer societies, according to a program based on peace, democracy and the market economy.<sup>17</sup>

These networks allowed forms of sociability that facilitated globalization by conveying an American vision of the world. The deployment of this philanthropic diplomacy went hand in hand with that of official diplomacy: the foundations managed to exploit the room for maneuver opened up by the American diplomatic system, which varies with time and geographical area, but without ever challenging the primacy of the American national interest, of which they have a high opinion despite their open internationalism. This closeness to public authorities provided the basis of American soft power, which benefits from a time-tested system and a wealth of experience that makes it able to combine global presence with regional or local initiatives.<sup>18</sup>

### ***France lags behind***

The reasons why France lags behind are both structural and cyclical. Regarding external affairs, the French state has long considered itself omnipotent. Domestically, it has long exercised a kind of monopoly over the general interest. This approach, along with taxation, has discouraged the emergence of think tanks. On a deeper level, French political culture has remained state-centric and largely structured by political parties. This specificity also had its roots in the close link between technical expertise and public decision-making, which emerged with Saint-Simonian scientific and encyclopedic ambition. The creation of administrative bodies of specialists began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, thus building a pool that the state drew on to conduct its public policies; this led to a very high concentration of expertise within the state apparatus.

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15. O. Zunz, *La Philanthropie en Amérique*, Paris: Fayard, 2012, p. 14.

16. I. Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, & Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 1-11.

17. L. Tournes, *L'Argent de l'influence. Les fondations américaines et leurs réseaux européens*, Paris: Autrement, 2010, pp. 5-8.

18. J. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990.

This “French model”, where the state has its own bodies of expertise and control, is radically different from the Anglosphere model based on the principle of “advocacy”, i.e. the tradition of confronting the interests and arguments of the various groups of actors in a political system, based on the practice of contradictory debate.<sup>19</sup> One of the historical features of the French model is the homogeneity in the training and behavior of the administrative elites in large institutions, and their constant influence on the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies. Ministers’ departmental staff serve as communication channels between the policy-maker and the administrative bodies, leaving little space for external expertise. At first sight, the French model thus appears to be incompatible with the culture of American/British think tanks. The model has a broad structural impact and largely explains the skepticism that prevails as to the viability of French think tanks. This does not mean, however, that there is inertia in French civil society. Quite the contrary. This society has the ideal instrument at its disposal when it comes to mobilizing and organizing itself, namely the “association”, defined by the 1901 law (according to Act One of which “An association is an agreement by which one or more persons bring together, in a permanent manner, their knowledge or their activities for a non-profit purpose.”<sup>20</sup>). The association sector currently accounts for 8% of salaried jobs in various areas of activity. Both its weakness and its vitality are apparent. On the one hand, its funding comes mainly from public subsidies and does not enable sustainable development. On the other hand, close to 70,000 associations are reportedly created each year, reflecting the plethora of collective initiatives stemming from society.<sup>21</sup>

In 1935, sixteen years after Chatham House was created, the CEPE was founded in the form of an association under the presidency of Sébastien Charléty. The general secretariat was entrusted to Étienne Dennery and Louis Joxe, who were determined to reproduce the American/British model. The CEPE certainly marked a departure in inter-war France, helping to import a model, a method and contacts, most notably with the launch of the journal *Politique étrangère*. However, it would nevertheless be misleading to compare its importance and impact to that of its American/British counterparts. The CEPE was closed down during the German Occupation and only reopened in 1945. France continued to lag behind until 1979 when the French Institute of Foreign Relations (Ifri) rose from the remains of the CEPE.

In fact, France was behind for a couple of reasons. First, after the First World War, the French elites were slow off the mark, failing to see the point of hybrid structures such as the Council on Foreign Relations (contrary to

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19. C. Delmas, *Sociologie politique de l'expertise*, Paris: La Découverte, 2011, p. 26.

20. F. Bloch-Lainé, quoted by J.-P. Rioux, “L’association en politique”, in: R. Rémond, *Pour une histoire politique*, Paris: Seuil, 1996, p. 108.

21. J.-L. Laville and R. Sainsaulieu, *L’Association. Sociologie et Économie*, Paris: Fayard, 2013, pp. 7-12.

the American and British elites); they had a very defensive view of the world at that time.<sup>22</sup> This vision, which was understandable given the suffering endured, was accompanied by a feeling of diplomatic weakening despite the military victory, a weakening reflected in the switch from French to English as the main language of diplomatic work. The French elites focused on Germany and watched the United States continue its ascent. The Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House gained further legitimacy with the Second World War, when they made a direct contribution to the mobilization of intellectuals to support the war effort.<sup>23</sup> In addition to being late, there was a marked characteristic – specific to France and one that continues to influence the perception of think tankers in our country – the place and function of intellectuals in the public space.<sup>24</sup> To understand the think tank *à la française*, we need to look at the American/British origins of the phenomenon, alongside the specificities of French intellectual life.

## The job of think tanker

The think tankers' main task is analysis and forecasting. Accurate analyses determine the soundness of forecasts, which in turn serve as a conceptual framework when identifying and formulating policy options. Failures in the making decision-process are often the outcome of inadequate analysis and unprepared forecasting. In addition to this dual role, think tankers must be able to produce useful knowledge and disseminate it in two ways: to the public domain and to the “decision-making oligopoly”.<sup>25</sup> That is why we say that, ideally, a think tanker should “think like an academic, act like a diplomat and write like a journalist”.<sup>26</sup> And we can add: innovate and acquire funding like an entrepreneur. A vast ambition, with difficulties that are often underestimated.<sup>27</sup>

### ***A permanent grouping of researchers***

Let's return to the definition of a think tank as an organization built around a permanent cadre of researchers or experts. A think tank's international reputation is based on its ability to maintain a qualitatively robust grouping and its degree of professionalism. This is crucial and is what differentiates

22. A. Williams, “Why Don't the French Do Think Tanks? France Faces Up to the Anglo-Saxon Superpowers, 1918-1921”, *Review of International Studies*, No. 34, 2008, pp. 53-68.

23. I. Parmar, *Think Tanks and Power in Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of the Role and Influence of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1939-1945*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 96-98.

24. G. Sapiro, “Modèles d'intervention politique des intellectuels. Le cas français”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 176-177, 2009, pp. 9-31.

25. See T. de Montbrial, *Action and Reaction in the World System: The Dynamics of Economic and Political Power*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013.

26. H. Brady, researcher at the Centre for European Reform, quoted in: A. Missiroli and I. Ioannides, *European Think Tanks and the EU*, BEPA, European Commission, September 2012, p. 11.

27. A. Selee, *What Should Think Tanks Do?*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, pp. 4-7.

think tanks from other kinds of “thinking societies”, such as political clubs or professional circles. The researchers or experts are not necessarily lifelong members, but devote most of their professional activity to the structure that remunerates them. In the American system, a person can start work with a think tank before taking on responsibilities in an executive or legislative body, and *vice versa*. This “revolving door” provides invaluable experience and helps to set think tanks apart from academic institutions. It also creates an interface between the administration and civil society. In reality, the revolving door is highly specific to the American political system, where think tanks enable contact between the executive or legislative apparatus, on the one hand, and civil society or the media on the other.<sup>28</sup> Given their number and size, they are able to offer more professional opportunities than in Europe.

Managerial literature distinguishes between “knowledge workers” and “knowledge professionals”.<sup>29</sup> Given the diversity and fragmentation of the industry, some think tankers can be classed as “knowledge workers”, i.e. the skilled population whose job is focused on information processing and the dissemination or transmission of knowledge. Others are “knowledge professionals”, i.e. a highly qualified group with a broad social base and whose activity focuses on knowledge creation, the development and handling of ideas and concepts, and likely to define professional fields. In principle, think tankers possess varying levels of skill in three areas: problem-solving (processing information from various sources), identifying new problems (understanding the interactions between the various actors in the analyzed environment) and “strategic brokerage” (using symbols and the ability to build relations); in other words, using their position as an interface between different areas of activity and social fields.

In think tanks, research is intended to be operational and useful; in this respect, it immediately sets itself apart from research conducted in a strictly academic context. It is policy-oriented, forward-looking, and intended to feed into decision-makers’ strategic reasoning, understood as a dialectic between ends and means. The work of think tankers is not meant to be judged solely by their peers; it is at its most effective when used within a system of social interaction. The tension between think tankers and academics is particularly acute in the field of international relations, which is not a fully-fledged academic discipline in France. Although there is strong demand for it, Stephen Walt, professor at Harvard Kennedy School of Government, questions academia’s inability to produce useful knowledge to

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28. “I lived off the intellectual capital I brought to my government job,” said Henry Kissinger, quoted in S. Boucher and M. Royo, *Les Think Tanks, Cerveaux de la guerre des idées*, Paris: Éditions du Félin, 2012, p. 37.

29. J.-P. Bouchez, *Le Management invisible. Autour des travailleurs du savoir*, Paris: Vuibert, 2008, pp. 6-23. Jean-Pierre Bouchez primarily draws on the following works: R. Reich, *The Work of Nations*, New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991; T. Davenport, *Thinking for a Living*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

decipher the world in which we live and then contribute to public debate.<sup>30</sup> He believes there are two reasons for this inability. Academics are prisoners of their theoretical jargon and hyper-specialization, and would hardly be credibly faced with decision-makers capable of constructing their own discourses and judgments. Furthermore, academic careers are governed by rules – whether explicit or unwritten – that discourage contact outside the academic sphere due to a risk of instrumentalization and reduced objectivity. Objectivity is not innate for academics or think tankers; however, the latter shoulder the risk and consider the subsequent application of their work the *raison d'être* of their profession.

### ***Analysis, forecasting and decision-making***

Think tanks lie at the intersection of four spheres:

- political (including diplomatic and military aspects),
- economic (the action of international companies and of the business community),
- media (organized around information flows and helping to shape opinions, mentalities and representations),
- and academic (the source of knowledge production and, to a certain degree, structuring the spread of knowledge).

Among the various books available on think tanks, the work of Thomas Medvetz, Assistant Professor at the University of California, marks a step forward.<sup>31</sup> He was directly inspired by Pierre Bourdieu and withdrew from the debate on the definition, preferring to delineate a territory specific to think tanks (*space of think tanks*), representing a buffer zone between the four spheres mentioned above. The declared relationship built with decision-makers inevitably raises the question of independence, from economic, political and intellectual viewpoints. It is also a matter of state of mind. All think tanks claim to be independent yet the real issue, according to Medvetz, is understanding the various ways in which forms of dependence are constructed and without which their activity would simply be meaningless.

Whenever they analyze a situation, think tankers must be able to draw up a power mapping that recognizes the interests at stake. They thus contribute directly to analyses of “risk”, a keyword for anyone who reflects on the future. To do this, they also need to establish links between fields and levels of analysis to avoid monocausal explanations, such as dogmatism. One inherent difficulty of the job of a think tanker is that their

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30. S. Walt, “International Affairs and the Public Sphere”, 2011, available at: <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org>.

31. T. Medvetz, “*Think Tanks in America*”, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

analyses and recommendations, while forward-looking, must be based on an in-depth understanding of the present and, thus, of the past, without which they would risk making errors of judgment. At the same time, they need to be sufficiently open-minded and enlightened to be able to identify the early signs of change; otherwise, they would tend to take the easy option of extrapolation and fail to spot turning points. These analytical skills must go hand in hand with an ability to organize the discussion and structure the debate, both of which involve mobilizing specific networking skills. Dialectically, research justifies debate that, in turn, validates research with qualified individuals from outside the research community.

With globalization, global governance has gradually emerged as a central theme for major think tanks. With the information and communication technology revolution, we have become increasingly interdependent, and a disruption occurring in one segment of the international – functional or regional – system can destabilize the entire system. We thus need to constantly adapt regulatory methods at all levels and ensure overall coordination. This sums up the problem of global governance. It is much more complex than the problem of corporate organization and governance, since “the world” does not exist as a political unit. Most of the tangible issues of global governance – energy, climate, food, water, health, and, of course, security, macro-economics, finance and digital – are addressed by a combination of states, companies and diverse representatives of civil society. Such groupings are intended to be practical and objective, which does not imply that they are free of any conscious or subconscious ideological hidden agenda. What Max Weber called *Wertfreiheit* – axiological neutrality – is an ideal towards which the social and human sciences, whether they be fundamental or applied, strive. Like any researcher or expert, the think tanker must constantly question the methods and conditions under which their knowledge is produced.

### ***Why support a think tank?***

As we answer this question, we will discuss funding and the economic model of think tanks. These organizations aspire to useful and operational research based on objective appreciation. So they need to know how to build interest among partners likely to provide funding. In France, there are six main sources of finance: the state, territorial authorities, European funding, individual donors, foundations and, increasingly, companies. Compared to the United States, foundations play a minimal role in Europe. The reduction in public funding has weakened the entire network of associations. Meanwhile, private funding requires specific know-how, and European funding requires engineering. In the absence of a powerful network of foundations, think tanks are forging a hybrid funding model, but it remains fragile and subject to economic conditions.



With regard to the state, think tanks take part in “intellectual diplomacy” and contribute directly to our country’s influence. Indeed, research and expertise are sources of influence on the international stage. In certain areas, if the think tanks have the necessary contacts, they can become involved in Track II diplomacy, i.e. informal but consequential discussions with the aim of forging links or dealing with sensitive subjects to be addressed in an official capacity. Their analyses also feed into the reflections of individual actors, informal groups and services at different levels of the state. There is much less appetite for this latter aspect in France than in the United States; things are changing, but the state and public office still tend to consider themselves as omniscient on international issues. With regard to companies, the work of think tanks helps with the analysis of political risk, which is an unmeasurable, non-modelable part of country risk. It facilitates connections and feeds into reflection at various levels of the organization. The parallel drawn between the work of think tanks and rating agencies prompts an examination of their respective positions *vis-à-vis* governments, companies and financial institutions, and of their methodological differences.<sup>32</sup>

On the whole, decision-makers who call on think tanks ask for clear analyses, free of academic jargon, that enable them to best answer the crucial question: “What is this all about?” – and, often, to prove or disprove their intuitions. Analyses developed as a result of genuine research work increase the chances of making accurate forecasts, i.e. identifying and, better still, reducing the uncertainty that always hangs over tomorrow. Some partners explicitly demand that strategic options be identified, despite the risks that come with this type of exercise. In the American context, some think tanks take the lead by willingly making recommendations that are meaningful within a political agenda. Other think tanks deliberately focus on analysis and forecasting as preparatory phases for decision-making. In both cases, we expect a think tank to interpret the world by shedding light on the balance of power or cooperation between stakeholders. It must then be able to identify new topics and emerging themes and be ready to assist in formulating problems and structuring the debate. Finally, it should be able to put itself in the decision-maker’s shoes by defining the range of possibilities.

This final point explains the lack of understanding that may arise between the academic, the journalist, the radical intellectual and the think tanker. We could say that think tankers are on the side of power in that they try to think about things from the viewpoint of those exercising power. This is a much more complex intellectual task than it would appear since it involves a detailed understanding of how the “policy-making oligopoly”

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32. A. Colonomos, *La Politique des oracles. Raconter le futur aujourd’hui*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2014, pp. 188-192.

works. At the same time, the think tankers have to split themselves in two, so to speak, to try to comprehend the difficulties inherent in the exercise of power and decision-making, continually operating within a framework of severe constraints, which are often invisible to the novice. Several types of misunderstanding arise from this stance, which is relatively well conceptualized by the think tanks. It almost automatically reinforces the significance attributed to the “governing group” with regard to other elements of the social fabric. Think tanks are not there to challenge the existing powers or social hierarchies, but neither do they dismiss the factors contributing to the illegitimacy of a power or the deadlocks in a society. This stance may also have another disadvantage in that it prioritizes the factors that contribute to stability and continuity, overriding the signals pointing to the transformation of a social group. On the other hand, it prompts reflection on action.

The fundamental difference between the general interest and individual interests forms the core of the think tankers’ task. Positioned as they are at the interface between several fields, they can join up different levels of analysis, from individual to transnational. More importantly, they are able to pinpoint the moment when the general interest splinters into a multitude of individual interests and, conversely, the point of coalescence where the latter merge to the benefit of the general interest. The ability to identify these moments of cleavage or coalescence brings considerable added analytical value. In the future, it is likely that some think tanks will try to provide a specific framework to facilitate this merging of interests. Working in liaison with other stakeholders, they could very well contribute not only by identifying the interests involved, a key step in ensuring coherence, but also by formulating ideas likely to influence them. This still means that the “policy-making oligopoly” has to take civil society seriously enough. In the digital age, this is an issue that affects the balance of power.

## **The nucleus of an international civil society?**

The concept of civil society is dialectically opposed to that of the state or, more precisely, state government. The government works with an operative definition of “public goods” that underpins the “general” interest of the state, a general interest that the same government is tasked with ensuring both at home and internationally (for international matters, we usually refer to “national” interest). In France, the state has long claimed to be the sole embodiment of the general interest. Representative democracy cannot be exercised without the existence of a civil society, which could be defined as all active units working towards the public good – and therefore, by definition, to political unity – but that do not belong to the state apparatus. From a pluralist perspective, think tanks would willingly present



themselves as the “*primus inter pares* of civil society”.<sup>33</sup> Yet this institutional stance draws much criticism.

### ***In vogue – but subject to criticism***

“Where lies the legitimacy of think tanks, which are often the projects of passionate individuals who can walk away from failed projects and are only accountable to themselves?”<sup>34</sup> This question raises two kinds of qualitative and ideological criticism.<sup>35</sup> Let us focus on the latter, largely inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu, an inevitable reference for critics of the French think tanks. Since they do not set themselves up as counter-powers, think tankers endeavor to contribute to the “production of the dominant ideology”. In their 1976 paper, Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski obviously did not use the term think tanks, but they analyzed the dominant discourse built around the *Plan*,<sup>36</sup> the place where speech becomes power “in those committees where the enlightened leader meets the enlightening intellectual”.<sup>37</sup> From this perspective, think tanks appear bound by an oligopolistic class in need of tributaries to maintain its power, exercise its symbolic violence and justify the maintenance of the prevailing order.<sup>38</sup> Taken to the extreme, this criticism depicts them as agents of general misinformation and of an interpretation of international relations aimed solely at conveying and consolidating the liberal *doxa*.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, in France their discourse on the general interest would only have an “establishment effect”, serving as a sign of social distinction.<sup>40</sup> The same would be true of the notion of governance to which they would constantly refer.

We are sometimes struck by the systematic nature of this rhetoric, which can verge on caricature and even insult.<sup>41</sup> Criticism of the ultra-liberal positioning of certain think tanks is undoubtedly the result of the strong impact small structures have made. If we do not go back to the Mont-Pèlerin Society, founded in 1947 by Friedrich Hayek and Wilhem Röpke, American and British neoliberal discourse was most

33. L. Desmoulin, “Profits symboliques et identité(s)”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

34. S. Waters, *Guardian* columnist quoted in S. Boucher and M. Royo, *Les Think Tanks*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

35. On the first point, see the debate initiated by P. Tetlock, *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It?*, Neoclassical Finance, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

36. It refers to the “Commissariat général au Plan” (CGP), a French institution created by De Gaulle in 1946. Jean Monnet was the first to occupy the head of the CGP from 1946 to 1952.

37. P. Bourdieu and L. Boltanski, “La production de l’idéologie dominante”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, No. 176-3, 1976, pp. 3-73.

38. D. Stone, “Think Tanks, Global Lesson-Drawing and Networking Social Policy Ideas”, *International Affairs*, No. 3, 2001, pp. 354-355.

39. R. Lenglet and O. Vilain, *Un pouvoir sous influence. Quand les think tanks confisquent la démocratie*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2011.

40. M. Pinçon and M. Pinçon-Charlot, *Les Ghettos du gotha. Au cœur de la grande bourgeoisie*, Paris: Seuil, 2007 [2010], pp. 183-184.

41. For example, @AntiThinkTanks is a Twitter account that regularly castigates the activity of think tanks.

notably endorsed by the Heritage Foundation and the Adam Smith Institute, whose work inspired Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, respectively. They have been remarkably effective in developing and disseminating their ideas, particularly to policy-makers and segments of public opinion.<sup>42</sup> Ideological commitment is openly asserted by those whose *raison d'être* is precisely to promote a political agenda; their activity is what we call “advocacy”. By definition, advocacy diverts think tanks from analytical and forecasting work, instead getting them to focus on promoting ideas for electoral purposes. That is why we must make a clear distinction between the two professions. Elsewhere, think-tank activity is often compared, or confused, with that of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that aspire to defend universal causes such as human rights or sustainable development.<sup>43</sup>

Former think tankers have been critical about financing that could lead to dependency and collusion.<sup>44</sup> Structures presenting themselves as think tanks can be administrative “sock puppets” because of their funding and mode of governance. On the other hand, private funding can lead to veiled lobbying activities. These developments are the subject of fierce controversy in Washington, where a redirection of the think tanks would come with a political and legislative scene dominated by powerful lobbies and interest groups seeking scientific approval and media impact.

In the United States, some observers are alarmed by militant developments and a drop in intellectual level (the number of think tankers with a PhD-level qualification is reportedly falling when compared to communication or marketing specialists), and have denounced political staff's excessive dependence on think tanks; for example, the Center for American Progress (CAP), the think tank created in 2003 to work on the Democratic Party's program, no longer claims to be objective, but simply effective, which makes it akin to a political party.<sup>45</sup> It is worth keeping a close eye on these controversies in France because they concern the very nature of the profession, and point to some kind of reconfiguration. Similarly, it would be useful to hold a fruitful debate between think tankers and their critics to explore the aims of intellectual production in a system like ours, as well as the importance given to civil society.

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42. M. Pirie, *Think Tank: The Story of the Adam Smith Institute*, London: Biteback Publishing, 2012; L. Edwards, *Leading the Way*, New York: Crown Forum, 2013.

43. See T. de Montbrial, *Action and Reaction in the World System*, *op. cit.*

44. M. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, New York: Penguin Press, 2009, p. 127.

45. T. Troy, “Devaluing the Think Tank”, *National Affairs*, No. 10, Winter 2012, pp. 84-85.

## ***Civil society and democracy***

To start with, we need to remember that the only truly common good of an active unit is the unit itself. Tangible collective or public goods are inherently flawed renderings of this single abstract good. The active unit's organization (the government in the case of a state) produces these renderings. So where does the legitimacy of these renderings come from? An abstract answer: previously from God; today, from the people. Specific procedures to demonstrate that the work of the government is in line with the will of the "people" are as flawed as are public pseudo-goods when compared to the single, inaccessible public good. In the minds of Rousseau's descendants, the best technique comes from direct universal suffrage, which characterizes the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic. Meanwhile, Tocqueville's successors are wary of the manipulation that can occur with direct democracy; they prefer the notion of representation, compatible with some measure of direct democracy. In practice, a myriad of combinations is possible.

Given that a perfect match between government and population is impossible, civil society is necessary. From a legal viewpoint, the initial manifestations of civil society stem from institutions based on freedom of expression and the right of association to defend or to promote interests considered by their campaigners – and often recognized as such by society – as forming a fraction of the general interest. In this respect, the principle of civil society is inseparable from representative democracy. It opposes the excess of direct democracy, the ideology of which can easily lead to the crushing of minorities and a justification of authoritarianism.

The state and civil society fit together as part of a system of reciprocal control. Civil society seems to form a flexible institutional layer, serving as an intermediary between the government and the people, tasked with giving airtime to certain categories of citizens interested in a particular aspect of the public good, while exercising critical vigilance towards the various branches of government, whose legitimacy needs renewing beyond the electoral processes. In return, the legitimacy of the various civil society organizations requires the government – as long as it is itself considered legitimate because, in the development of a state, the emergence of civil society is often the outcome of a struggle – to exercise control over issues such as respect for the law or transparency in governance and financing. There is a risk that civil institutions may be screens, designed to promote specific interests or, more generally, interests contrary to the notion of public good. Even without talking about corruption here, lobbies influence governments as well as associations, foundations, and the like. In France, trade unions, which are deemed to be representative regardless of how many members they have and which are largely financed by taxes, are often taken to be civil society organizations even though, by their very nature, they defend categorical interests. As for think tanks, they suffer from the

state's lack of trust in civil society, which is detrimental in a complex and interconnected world.

However, in many places, and in emerging countries in particular, think tanks have been enjoying growth, buoyed by public authorities or philanthropy, in response to the world's increasing complexity and the evermore intense social interactions at an international level. If this category of active unit were abolished, the only "challengers" that governments would come up against would be partisan ideologues, cloistered academics or, even more worryingly, new forms of credence.<sup>46</sup> Public debate everywhere would take a more passionate, less rational turn. Indeed, professional think tanks appeal more to reason than to emotions, serving as an interface and enabling smoother dialogue between powers. In this respect, they can consider themselves as the nucleus of a global civil society, still in incubation.

### ***Aiming for a global civil society***

All civil society starts with its roots in the Culture of a state, a culture that varies greatly from one country to another. Civil society keeps its eye on the state (in both senses of the word: the political unit itself and its Organization) and *vice versa*. The latter point is crucial, because the notion of civil society is no more libertarian than liberalism itself, as Tocqueville explains: absolute freedom or license can lead to anarchy or dictatorship, the former often spawning the latter. However, "global" political unity does not – yet – exist. Given foreseeable technological trends, it may be that political unity of this kind – which will inevitably be new in form and of biological or epigenetic type – can emerge, albeit very gradually and through multiple crises, or otherwise can face far-reaching collective catastrophes.

The lack of "global" political unity means that there are no global public goods, unless we modify and, hence, weaken the concept of public good. The growth and deepening of the externalities that characterize globalization so distinctly increase the risk of severe or even potentially cataclysmic systemic failure in a particular area of the "international system", and thus its structural instability. Since the First World War, we have seen that catastrophic changes in direction can occur at the global level. It is remarkable that the Cold War ended without major drama and that, since the 1980s, the global landscape has changed more through "slow mutations" than through deadly turmoil.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the current financial crisis or the Arab revolutions remind us that we are never immune

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46. G. Bronner, *La Démocratie des crédules*, Paris: PUF, 2013.

47. T. de Montbrial, *La Revanche de l'histoire*, Paris: Julliard, 1985, pp. 20-21.

to unpredictable shocks, unforeseeable in both occurrence and intensity – those “black swans” that make accurate forecasts illusive.<sup>48</sup>

In its essence, the project for global governance specifically aims to increase the structural stability of the “international system” and thus reduce the risk of catastrophic shifts in all areas. Now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we may consider that there is a global public good that reflects a real “wish to live together” at the root of any sustainable and stable political unity, and that is global governance. In this idea, we must see the nucleolus (but not yet the nucleus) of another idea, that of “global” political unity.

As an idea, we can probably expect any reasonable thinker to recognize governance as the *par excellence* global public good. The difficulties begin when we ask who should convert this abstract public good into tangible public goods, i.e. implement the practical modalities of governance on one issue or another. Again, we come back to the lack of a “global” political unit with an organization that would be empowered to do so. However, bearing in mind that it is often beneficial to weaken concepts in the mathematical sense, we could rightfully consider the United Nations – which has a history spanning almost seven decades – as the nucleus of a substitute organization. Nucleus because, in its current state, the United Nations can merely absorb the shock of inter-state relations, but that is already an important step.

If we take this analysis a step further, we see that think tanks can become more involved in the issue of global governance, and are more able than the other stakeholders to systematically contribute to inspiring and supporting these initiatives. They are already doing so, but still quite tentatively. If they become more aware of their potential and take this role more seriously, we may begin to form the nucleus of a global civil society. And to conclude, allow us a dream: It is through the development of a common culture and the building of legitimate modes of global governance that think tanks will make a modest but genuine contribution to the emergence of this “global” political unity, the maturity of which will inevitably be consolidated in the decades to come. There are already initiatives aimed at this.

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If they are to develop, the French think tanks will have to deal with three challenges. First: explaining the profession and adapting it to a context of crisis. What is unique about the think tank is its ability to move constantly between the political, economic, media and academic spheres. As a result, the profession will undergo transformation, brought about by the combined effects of its efforts to adjust to constraints, and of the ways in

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48. N. Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, United States: Random House, 2007.

which it interacts with each of the spheres mentioned above. The profile of the think tanker is, by definition, shaped by multiple influences. We need, therefore, to patiently explain the specificities of the profession to partners as well as the actors on the fringes of this ecosystem.

The second challenge is the internationalization of the French think-tank community. To start with, the community needs to affirm its place on the international stage, mastering the codes and production methods of its best foreign competitors and partners. This ambition implies resources and a constant effort to professionalize in order to contribute to the transformations of the industry, which has powerful possibilities for structuring knowledge power on a global scale. If our country is subjected to and exerts influence, it cannot ignore the think tanks. This is why French think tanks should stop thinking of themselves as imported commodities. They are also a means of exporting and affirming France's presence. They are destined to be leaders in the French-speaking world (which will continue to grow numerically in the coming years), but to do so, they must strengthen their presence in the English-speaking world, where the battle of ideas is fought on a global scale, and take positions in other linguistic areas.

The last and trickiest challenge is the emergence of a global civil society in the digital age. The digital era is transforming dissemination techniques, but above all, it is testing the ability of think tanks, for example, to feed the debate on the democratization of civil societies. The unquestionable change in social interactions brought about by digital technology is leading to profound changes in the terms of discussion, understood as the creation of shared grammar and rules. It is, indeed, the discussion that enables us to act together. Yet with this upsurge in interaction, think tanks lose part of their uniqueness as a bridge between the organization of the debate and research. Nonetheless, they still have three specific features that are difficult to coordinate simultaneously: the production and dissemination of knowledge identifiable by trusted names, the ability to connect actors from different fields, and the expansion and structuring of spaces for debate and discussion. By strengthening their links to increase their impact, think tanks will be able to portray themselves as representatives of global civil society, constantly drawing on their national roots and their international reach. This is the exciting challenge that faces the new generation of think tanks.



# Ifri's profession

**Thierry de Montbrial**

## 40 years of history

The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) was created at the end of a decade still dominated by the Cold War, but also marked by détente in Europe and by arms control – a form of global governance before the term existed – which unfortunately has scarcely survived into current times. With the fall of the Shah in Iran and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan – behind the wave of political Islamism and terrorism which has continued to increase since then –, the terrible war between Iraq and Iran which ended in a draw, the resistance and rise of Solidarity in Poland, the election of Pope Jean-Paul II, the acceleration of the arms race which became qualitative with the information technology revolution – which would soon permeate finance and the global economy and turn into a “digital revolution” – and the fossilization of the Soviet regime, the 1980s ended in disaster for the USSR, however in Beijing, the repression of Tiananmen Square concluded ten crazy years following the fall of the “Gang of Four”.

From the 1990s, what will be remembered will be the more or less erratic attempts at reconfiguration in Europe, the downward spiral of post-Soviet Russia, the deepening of the Middle Eastern crises following the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein and the (mainly) US intervention, the disappearance of the “Third World” with the partial conversion of China and India to economic liberalism, the intensification of the technological revolution and the emergence of globalization, its ideology and illusions. And we entered the third millennium with the tragedy of September 11. Islamist terrorism arrived on the scene at a time when the United States was beginning to structure its worldview around competition with China, which obviously was becoming the major issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Its first decade was marked by difficulties in Europe, with a Community that had become a European Union with no clear sense of purpose and the authoritarian rebound of Russia, which felt it had been cheated by a “West” driven by an expansionist ideology. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 automatically favoured Iran's rise and almost

20 years after it started, the war in Afghanistan has not ended. All this has fed the escalation of political Islamism and the gathering around it of individuals who have been led astray in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Economically, the end of the 2000s was dominated by the subprime crisis and its repercussions. We were on the verge of a crash comparable to that of 1929, and the Eurozone, the new backbone of the European venture, still had not finished recovering from it. Globalization, both political and economic, has started to show its limitations. Nations and borders have come to the fore again whereas they were said to have disappeared. The need for cooperation and coordination bodies (global governance) – without which the risk of systemic crises borders on certainty – has become imperative, but only intellectually and for the elites who are also increasingly challenged.

The 2010s began with the tragedy of the “Arab Spring”. The terminology is enough to reveal the errors of judgment of the main political leaders of the time. I am also critical of the new mini Cold War with Russia since, although legally, the annexation of Crimea is unacceptable without speaking about the mess of Donbass, it is clear that, blinded by liberal ideology, the Western powers were unable to understand what the Russians saw as their vital interests. Consequently, they pushed them into the arms of China, likewise Iran, at a time when the former is increasingly openly asserting its desire for power. The start of the third millennium is also marked by an increasingly acute awareness of global issues in the world, such as climate change, the nature of which should be sufficient to rationally impose the idea of global governance. We must also keep things in perspective and recognize that the climate and environment are included in a delayed wave of millennial fears (technology and its potential also have a place). Still, on the cusp of 2019, with Donald Trump and “populists” of all kinds helping, global governance is in bad shape, when we have never needed it as much.

## Understanding the world

Forty years after Ifri’s founding, the world at large has changed, probably more so than in any equivalent period of time in the past. Nowadays, like during all these years, our teams are committed to understanding it. With a telescope, when it comes to understanding major interactions without dwelling on the details; with a microscope, if the goal is focused on a region or a specific country (the Arabian-Persian Gulf, China, Russia, etc.) or even on a cross-disciplinary issue (cybersecurity, energy, etc.). Their work is not carried out by amateurs but by professionals who have their own methods.

Their *intentionality* (I am using this word according to Husserl’s meaning, as we can say more prosaically “what is it about?” or *aboutness*) is not the ideology in principle, but the reality. We are, in fact, addressing public or private decision-makers who need contextual analysis and



predictions as accurately as possible in order to better develop their own strategies, academics who look objectively at the contemporary world, as well as journalists who are more interested in reality than ideology (this is still *intentionality*). I would like to point out that the realism we are dealing with here has nothing to do with Realpolitik or cynicism, but with a certain view of the truth: if a square is really square, it is not round.

Ifri is internationally recognized as the leading French think tank.<sup>1</sup> Before it, no one spoke about think tanks in France. We were obviously familiar with the term in 1979 because of the primarily (but not exclusively) Anglo-American institutions, which we were initially inspired by, but we did not assert it before the 1990s. Even at that time, it was not over-used. Nowadays, any club or group that wants to publicly issue more or less reasoned opinions uses this name, and nobody can blame them. Words or phrases have their own life, like the word “geopolitical”, hijacked from its original meaning since the 1980s. Literally, think tank should be translated as “*réservoir de pensée*” in French. Such an expression was appropriate in the military context where it appeared.<sup>2</sup> So, we commonly talk about “strategic thinking”.

The current substitution of the word “idea” for the word “thinking” is relevant, but should be used with caution, as from there it is easy to slide into ideology; which historically has not been the primary role of think tanks, even though axiological independence (Max Weber’s *Wertfreiheit*) is an unattainable ideal, and even if over time, particularly in the United States, think tanks have appeared based on openly ideological grounds (the Heritage Foundation for example, or the Atlantic Council, which is very active in Donald Trump’s presidency). Ultimately, for Pierre Bourdieu and his school of thought, every think tank is an ideological construction serving particular interests.

Rather than going down this slippery slope, I prefer to repeat a practical definition here that I suggested in 2011, inspired by the history of think tanks in the United States, and which still applies to Ifri: I call any open organization built around a permanent cadre of researchers whose role is to develop, on an objective basis, ideas relating to policy-making and to private or public strategies subscribing to an overall perspective, a think tank. I refer to the original text for a detailed commentary and restrict myself to the following comments.

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1. See for example J. G. Mc Gann, *2018 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, January 2019.

2. See in this study: T. de Montbrial, “What is a think tank?”, pp. 6-19, and T. de Montbrial and T. Gomart, “*Think tanks à la française*”, pp. 20-37. See also T. de Montbrial, *La Pensée et l’Action*, Bucharest: Romanian Academy, 2015.

## Questions of scope and method

Firstly, the profession of think tanks differs significantly from the more or less related ones of consultants of all kinds (strategy, communication, lobbying, etc.), journalists or even economic intelligence or intelligence experts, *whose intentionality is different*. The risk of confusion certainly calls for good practices in governance, that Ifri for its part has always sought to perfect according to an approach which now forms part of a rigorous institutional framework.<sup>3</sup> Second point: only the largest think tanks, like the Brookings Institution, can hope to cover the entire field of public and *a fortiori* private policies. So, Ifri is specialized in the already vast field of international relations and it still has a lot to do to fully cover it. Thirdly: the ideas in question here are always intended to shed light on aspects identified by the “international system” (this expression is a convenience of language),<sup>4</sup> whether we look at them with a telescope or a microscope, to reuse this metaphor. Asking ourselves now if in 2049 (100 years after Mao’s victory), China will be the leading global power or how the trade showdown between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping will end: these are two very different exercises.

Fourthly, the activity of think tankers utilizes specific methods, whether it be collecting the information and *objective* data necessary for their analysis or the processing of this information: the use of history and geography is almost always essential to pare down an issue (how can you not be interested nowadays in the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt?); but then, in terms of events in the making, in-depth knowledge of the fields (a good think tanker is a great traveler, and is often expected to have extensive linguistic skills), a certain familiarity with economics and other social sciences (law, demographics, sociology, psychology, etc.) and even with logic, are in principle essential to them. The ideal think tanker would not be an individual, but a multi-disciplinary team. In addition, think tanks also organize numerous debates between peers or with other stakeholders in their fields.<sup>5</sup> The ecosystem that they form allows them to enrich the quality of their analysis and insights.

I come to, and this is my fifth point, that analysis is not an end in itself, and that its usefulness lies in the predictions that can be derived from it and the use that can be made of them. Having written extensively on this

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3. See Ifri’s Charter of Values and Principles, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

4. See T. de Montbrial, *Action and Reaction in the World System*, *op. cit.* See also T. de Montbrial, *La Pensée et l’Action*, *op. cit.*

5. *Track I Diplomacy* refers to official relations between States, taking for example the form of negotiations conducted by diplomats. *Track II Diplomacy* touches upon more informal relations in the form of extended exchanges with civil society members. It makes it possible to address sensitive subjects which could not be done officially.

subject,<sup>6</sup> I will restrict myself here to two observations. On the one hand, all prediction focuses on the possible *ex ante* answers to a specific question, answers on which a probability assessment is made, logically from the preceding analysis. A distinctive feature of analysis is to reduce uncertainty. On the other hand, as astute as a think tanker's judgment may be, the complexity of the situations they study makes it impossible to completely eliminate uncertainty; when can we, therefore, say that they were right or, on the contrary, that they were wrong? For the first point, if I say *ex ante* that such an answer has the highest probability and if it appears *ex post* that this is correct, we are justified in saying I was right. But if the *ex post* answer is the one, I had *ex ante* assigned the lowest probability to, am I really wrong? Yes, if you prove to me with data that would have been at my fingertips (as part of the available resources!) and better thought-out analyses, I could or should have assigned *ex ante* a higher probability to the answer in question. If it turns out that a competitor is regularly better than me in this respect, their reputation will increase and mine will suffer from it.

Any *a posteriori* critical analysis of a think tanker's work must focus on identifying the questions they asked, the data they had access to and the generally implicit models they used to process them (hence the importance of logic or even epistemology). One important aspect in the interaction of think tanks, which consider themselves as peers, is that while remaining competitors, each one can refine its analysis and opinions on contact with others. However, having said all that, we must also recognize that some events are completely unpredictable, when the actual answer to an issue could not even be identified in advance as possible. For example, the advent of atomic weapons before the discovery of relativity. Furthermore, people cannot make a list every morning at the foot of their bed of all the conceivable horrors that may affect their day.

## The dimension of time

I still have – this is my sixth point – to complete my remarks about analysis and prediction with short observations about the dimension of time. It seems to me, I must start with this undoubtedly philosophical, but also very concrete observation: from a human point of view, at any scale, the present – the moment *t* – does not exist. All present, even in an earthquake in a physical or metaphorical sense, is a blurred overlapping area between a past still there and future already here.<sup>7</sup> This is why, in the realities of life, any analysis contemplated as secondary to an action must have two sides:

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6. See “La prévision: sciences de la nature – technologie – sciences morales et politiques” in T. de Montbrial, *La Pensée et l'Action*, *op. cit.* See also T. de Montbrial, *Living in Troubled Times: A New Political Era*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2019.

7. T. de Montbrial, *Living in Troubled Times: A New Political Era*, *op. cit.*

retrospective and prospective. And on either side, we are better off using the ternary division familiar to economists since Alfred Marshall: short, medium and long run. The *short run* is the temporality of the immediate or current action, in the limit of the routine level. The *medium run* is the temporality of investment (in the broad sense), of strategy and partially of controlled uncertainty. From an action point of view, the *long run* is more about vision than strategy. For example, saying that a stagnating political unit will perish and that survival is based on adaptability is a proven principle, but one which does not lead to accurate predictions, except to say like Keynes: in the *long run*, we are all dead, or like Jean-Baptiste Duroselle: all empires will perish.

The ternary division also applies to the past. In any current situation, the short run of the past is more or less mixed up with that of the future and is identified with the present. The long and medium runs of the past correspond to Thucydides' distinction between the *fundamental* and *immediate causes* of an event. So, the fundamental cause of the collapse of the USSR was the inability to adapt specifically to the Soviet regime. Its immediate cause was a set of circumstances, some of which were highly unlikely to be *ex ante*. The greatest difficulty in dating a prediction is that the immediate causes of an event are not of the same nature as the fundamental causes, which in some cases can make the dating of disruptions extremely unpredictable, as for many complex physical phenomena, for example, an earthquake or the collapse of a bridge. The problem raised by the "Arab Spring" of 2011 is not that we did not predict it on time – it was impossible –, but that having happened, it was so poorly analyzed by many analysts and by political leaders, who consequently accumulated errors that we are still feeling the effects of. But that is life, and who could we complain to?

In any event, and this is where I wanted to get to: the time scale of the think tanker is the *meso-*, the period that ranges from the medium-term past to the medium-term future, which must encompass the man of action. Yet, it should be added that these concepts of periods cannot be expressed by precise calendar periods, each phenomenon having its proper time. The medium run in some industries can be about 15 years or more. For the climate, perhaps a century. And the former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson used to say: "*One week is long time in politics.*" This is a fair comment, but it reflects badly on democracy nowadays characterized as liberal.

Such considerations of analysis and prediction lead to a seventh point. It is generally expected that a *think tank* is prescriptive and this is often the case for those whose main topic is domestic public policies. In the field of international relations, which is Ifri's field, we must set aside the use that companies may make of their work since obviously no think tank unless it is very specialized, could claim to build their strategies for them. But the work

of think tanks can be very useful for the development of their contextual analyses, for example country risks. The issue is more subtle, in terms of the contribution of think tanks to international politics in general, beyond the marked influence they exert on opinion, directly or through the transnational community they form between them, through media, etc.

In the field of foreign policy, by simplifying a lot, a think tanker's work typically is as follows: if a State makes a decision  $d$  (for example, Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran in 2018), the consequences – more or less easy to date – will be  $x$ ,  $y$  or  $z$  with subjective probabilities  $a$ ,  $b$  or  $c$ . In Western democracies, think tanks deliver – most often publicly – this kind of analysis. Countries like China or Russia have important think tanks, more or less endowed by governments, which liaise with their international counterparts like Ifri, but their role as advisors to the government remains strictly confidential.

In Western Europe, serious debates rarely focus on radical changes in foreign policy. However, Donald Trump's election has opened the door to the unknown. But, many particular aspects like migration policies, policies vis-à-vis China, Russia, Turkey or even Syria, to name a few current examples, are hotly debated, as well as global governance in general. Hence the importance of international forums, like the *World Policy Conference*, whose first meeting was held in Evian in October 2008, and whose role (prescriptive) I now describe: “Contribute to promoting a world that is more open, more prosperous and fairer. This requires an unremitting effort to understand the actual forces at play and the interactions between them, as well as to explore non-aggressive ways of adapting how States connect with each other at all levels while respecting the culture and fundamental interests of each nation.”<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the 2017 presidential election, Ifri also concluded a rehabilitation of the concept of *national interest*, understood in a sufficiently broad sense to aggregate in a kind of virtual index tangible and intangible interests (values) that often compete with each other.<sup>9</sup> Analysis of the national interest again requires thinking about different timescales.

Finally, an eighth and last remark: how are these researchers, whom we have called think tankers, trained? In 1976, as part of École polytechnique's move to Palaiseau, a commission, which I chaired, proposed creating an institute of action sciences, which could have played this role. This project was stillborn for political reasons. Perhaps, with better preparation, it will be revived one day. In any case, there is no standard pathway for becoming a think tanker. Some come from history,

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8. More information is available on the website: [www.worldpolicyconference.com](http://www.worldpolicyconference.com).

9. T. de Montbrial and T. Gomart (eds.), *Notre Intérêt national. Quelle politique étrangère pour la France?*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2017. See also the author's paper at the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* on February 4, 2019.

sociology, economics or political science; others from mathematics or physics, and I could go on. In the end, it is a multidisciplinary profession at the edge of action, focused on the medium term and therefore, to a large extent on humans. In France today, there are many think tankers, among the most renowned in the field of international relations who were trained at Ifri, although Ifri is not a school. This is not the least of the services it has provided to the community.

## Finally: what does Ifri really do?

Before concluding, I just want to briefly return to the relationship between Ifri and its stakeholders. It is fundamentally a relationship of influence. Still, it must be explained, since it is enough to open a dictionary to see that the semantic field of the word “influence” is vast and that its connotations can be very negative, like when we talk about trading influence, often with regard to well-known people linked to the political world and more or less active in the “business” world. Hence, the importance of explaining conceptually the positive nature of the influence exerted by a think tank like Ifri.

To this end, I will summarize in a few words a paper significantly more developed which the reader can refer to.<sup>10</sup> Let us say that a natural or legal person A exerts influence on person B in a specific operational context (for example: should such a company invest in Mohammed bin Salman’s Saudi Arabia? or even: how to assess the cyber risks posed to democratic States by Russia or China?), if A’s way of thinking (hence analyzing and predicting) changes that of B. Influence is primarily a matter of attention, and over time, B will remain aware of what A says (and *a fortiori* will contribute to their funding), if and only if A has a good reputation, which refers back to my fifth point about the art of prediction. The international community of think tanks is very competitive, and we can only survive by continuously striving for excellence. A non-competitive think tank can, in fact, only last through questionable funding.

If I have used the word think tank a lot in the previous pages, it is both for historical reasons and because people in the field recognize it. We do not deny it, but as I mentioned earlier, it is nowadays over-used and, for the general public, hardly corresponds to the demanding definition I have given of it. Therefore, it seems useful to conclude this presentation of Ifri’s profession, 40 years after its creation on the remains of the Centre d’études de politique étrangère (CEPE or Centre for the Study of Foreign Policy) founded in 1935, and to provide a summary in a few lines with simple words.

Ifri is an *institute for research* (analysis and prediction) and *debate* about the countries that form the fabric of the *contemporary world* and

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10. See the author’s introduction in T. de Montbrial, *Histoire de mon temps*, Bucharest: Romanian Academy, National Foundation for Science and Arts, 2018.



their interactions. Nowadays, it has a *prominent place*, recognized by its *peers* in a competitive transnational network that originated about a hundred years ago, of institutions with the same purpose. Its governance, diversity of funding and ethical framework established by its Charter, guarantee its *independence* and respect for the values that drive it. Its teams are made up of *permanent professional researchers*. Their studies aim to *inform public* or *private decision-makers* whose role has a key international dimension. Ifri's culture is broadly based on *cross-disciplinarity and co-operation between its teams*, made increasingly necessary by the complexity of the international system. Ifri always strives to work towards and for the benefit of the *public interest*. Hence, it is helping through its *influence*, in France and abroad, to drive and structure public debate on the major global issues, to *strengthen a reasonably open and peaceful world over time*.

The adverb *reasonably*, which I also use for a five-word phrase for the *World Policy Conference's* mission ("for a *reasonably* open world"), refers to the idea of respecting each nation's culture and fundamental interests, without which no structurally stable, and therefore peaceful, international governance is possible.

This is how Ifri identifies itself at 40 years old. So, it intends to boost its position in the coming decades, which will see fierce competition between the United States and China for access to supremacy; the continuation and intensification of the digital revolution, with perhaps new technological breakthroughs, particularly in the field of health or armaments; unprecedented social, economic and political changes on all continents; the worsening of global problems such as climate change and the environment; large population movements; and finally the more or less successful continuation of regional group efforts capable of standing up to the two 21<sup>st</sup>-century superpowers, starting with the European Union. However, whatever may be said now about the long-term future, it certainly has glitches, wars and all sorts of surprises in store for us, at least as great as those which Ifri has been an active eyewitness to during an existence that is already part of history.



# Changes in the think tank industry

**Thomas Gomart**

In 2018, 7,800 think tanks were listed worldwide. Although the term covers very different realities and practices, think tanks now form an industry. For several years, many initiatives have been aimed at bringing them together. These regular meetings often focus on the criticisms they receive, particularly from the media, which concentrates on two main aspects: their credibility depending on the link between their mission, activities and funding; their relevance depending on their positioning, production and impact. Think tanks are not immune to a degree of suspicion towards expertise, which results in a general questioning of institutions and mediations. At the same time, the demands on them from public authorities, companies, the media and academia are continuing to intensify and diversify. For example, the French government's expectations with regard to think tanks specializing in international issues, "are extremely ambivalent and sometimes try to square the circle."<sup>1</sup>

Current thinking within the industry is focused on sources of funding, including from authoritarian regimes or philanthropic foundations. It seems that authoritarian regimes nowadays pay much more attention to think tanks and the development of the industry than democratic regimes. The latter appear obsessed by the three "Ms" (money, markets, measurement) and seem to be guided by the principle that money would naturally go to the correct ideas. Of course, the changes at work present both risks and opportunities: they can not only increase the influence of think tanks but also destroy the links that bind them together. They are already changing the texture, particularly for its European component. Because of their political culture, their business model and intellectual tradition, the European think tanks must adapt, individually and collectively, to two major challenges if they want to continue to fuel the

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1. C. Lechery, "Les think tanks, des aides à l'action diplomatique de la France", *Revue internationale et stratégique*, No. 2, 2018, p. 23.

fundamental relationship between the scientist and the politician: the rise of China and the polarization of the marketplace of ideas.

## First challenge: the rise of China

With the First World War, the appearance and then development of think tanks corresponded to a radical change in the international system. The creation of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1910) and the Brookings Institution (1916) was followed after the war by that of the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House in London (1920), and the Council on Foreign Relations (1921) in New York. Among the conditions which have shaped the industry on a lasting basis, are the following: the US intervention in Europe, the transition in leadership between the United Kingdom and the United States at the global level, the collective security project of the League of Nations (LoN) and the Bolshevik experience, soon followed by the rise of Nazism. It is in this context that the think tanks mentioned previously, which have since become recognized institutions, established the rules of the profession. This reminder raises the issue of the development of the industry in terms of the international scene in 2019, also summarized in four characteristics: the rise of China, the change of course of the United States, democratic doubt in Europe and the development of political Islam. As a backdrop, there is partial awareness of the finiteness of ecosystems and the rapid spread of information and communication technologies.

There is a direct link between developments on the international scene and that of think tanks, insofar as the latter are not only professional producers of content, but also stakeholders in power games in terms of influence. They can be both vectors and targets for public and intellectual diplomacy and play an important role in terms of soft power. From this point of view, there is a fundamental difference between think tanks established in authoritarian regimes and their counterparts in democratic regimes, as the former are assigned specific tasks, whereas the latter, whilst maintaining closer or distant ties with public authorities, are supposed to maintain their freedom of initiative. Both share a common mission, essential for the coming years in terms of the already visible polarization in the international system, which consists of maintaining regular and constructive contact to keep communication channels open at all times. The future of the industry depends on its ability to maintain this type of interface and to keep a common minimum basic understanding of its mission.

The first characteristic of the current international scene – the rise of China – is already making its effects felt in the industry. In China, the think tank landscape is characterized by the creation of the first organizations at Deng Xiaoping's initiative in the wake of the Cultural Revolution: they played a key role in intellectual connections between the United States and China in order to set priorities for economic reform and to draw up the

framework of globalization.<sup>2</sup> However, in their organization, as in their missions, the Soviet matrix of the Chinese think tanks is also evident. The structuring and the direct relationship maintained with the political authorities by the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) are replicated in the major Chinese think tank model. IMEMO, which was founded in 1956 in full de-Stalinisation, is the successor of the Institute of World Economy and International Affairs, desired by Leon Trotsky, which existed between 1925 and 1948. In 2015, IMEMO changed its name to become the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations.<sup>3</sup> It currently has 315 researchers, including 8 academicians, according to its website.

Since the mid-1970s, interactions between Chinese and US think tanks have continued to intensify, particularly in the economic field. They changed in nature over the past decade with the end of the myth of convergence with Washington, that is to say, the idea that China, particularly with its accession to the World Trade Organization (2001), would play the globalization game following Western rules. On the Chinese side, since 2013 the authorities have been calling for their think tanks to open up internationally to collect foreign analysis and to promote official watchwords.<sup>4</sup> They are subject to strict ideological control which restricts them. In October 2014, Xi Jinping stated that “the think tanks must be led by the Chinese Communist Party and adhere to the right direction,” while providing their intellectual contribution to the renewal of the Chinese nation.

The overwhelming majority of Chinese think tankers are civil servants and party members, which is a fundamental difference from most of their foreign counterparts. In addition to their information or research roles, which vary depending on the organization, there are roles of influence, communication and propaganda for the finely segmented, regional, national and international audiences, as well as “expert consultations” and reporting solely to their authorities. Their research role consists of tracking countries, areas, or topics over a period of time and sending the accumulated knowledge to the political authorities. They have to improve the latter's understanding of the world. In that sense, they may enjoy better social recognition within the Chinese system than their European counterparts do within theirs. They also provide a public education role through media, particularly television. The close relationship between the think tanks and the latter, both domestically and abroad, is key to understanding because it should both educate the public on international

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2. J. Gewirtz, *Unlikely Partners, Chinese Reformers, Western Economists, and the Making of Global China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.

3. Yevgeny Primakov (1929-2015) was Prime Minister (1998-1999), Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998), and Director of the SVR (Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service) (1991-1996) after having led IMEMO (1985-1989).

4. A. Ekman, “Les think tanks chinois: ambitions et contradictions”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 82, No. 4, Ifri, December 2017, pp. 145-156.

issues and strengthen China's soft power. In 2015, the authorities said they wanted to develop between 50 and 100 "leading" think tanks, capable of competing with the best US institutions. For this reason, they are encouraging enhanced international co-operation, the recruitment of foreign experts, as well as the opening of foreign TV channels to present a China that listens to its partners and is keen to promote its view of globalization. The implementation of this policy must be followed with the greatest attention, as it is already determining the profession's transformation. It is not exempt from a marked contradiction between the desire for internationalization, and therefore openness, and the desire to tighten ideological control, which tends to present Western ideas and exports as potentially dangerous. In that sense, it is only a reflection of the current position of Xi Jinping's China in the aftermath of the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress.

## **Second challenge: the polarization of the marketplace of ideas**

Like all operations, think tanks are not exempt from questions about the consequences of technological breakthroughs and, currently, about the use of big data and aggregated data. Chinese think tanks are encouraged to invest in this area to conduct their research like their US counterparts, some of whom have developed innovative programs, particularly in terms of mapping. Generally, think tanks are expanding their range of tools, for example, by using indexes and rankings to gain media impact, or online surveys and contributions to reach new audiences and organize collective intelligence processes. Obviously, the development of new products should be closely followed and contributed to. However, the industry's most profound changes will probably come less from products than from the nature of social interactions generated by think tanks with their different stakeholders. In fact, they are defined by their access, their intellectual relevance and their ability to move between four spheres: political (including diplomatic and military aspects), economic (covering business operations and the business community), media (organized around information flows of different natures) and academic (the source of the production of knowledge).

Over the course of their 100-year history, think tanks have managed to mark out a space of their own on direct contact with these four spheres. The question they are currently asking is whether this space will be reduced, maintained or expanded over the course of the next decade. The answer to this question depends on the point of view taken. If, we were to remain within the industry, it seems to be growing because of the number of think tanks created each year and their geographical and thematic distribution. On the other hand, if you take a point of view outside of the industry, trying to trace the outlines of a global marketplace of ideas, you quickly realize

that think tanks occupy a very limited space which would tend to shrink as soon as the marketplace of ideas extends.

As Daniel Drezner, Professor of International Politics at Tufts University notes, the think tank industry has become a segment of the Ideas Industry, which encompasses a variety of actors (political movements and parties, consultants, media, universities, etc.). In their detractors' eyes, think tanks would form a bubble and would have lost a grip on the political and media realities.<sup>5</sup> The Ideas Industry openly favors opinion leaders over public intellectuals. To put it bluntly, TED conferences<sup>6</sup> have become the gold standard and courses at the Collège de France are a kind of intellectual folklore. Three trends would explain this change in the United States: the loss of confidence in authority and expertise, the polarization of US political life, and the staggering rise in economic and social inequalities.

These developments, which are also apparent in Europe, according to Tom Nichols, a Professor at the US Naval War College, could lead to the death of expertise.<sup>7</sup> Nothing less. During the Brexit campaign, Michael Gove, one of leading figures in the Conservative Party in favor of Leave, summed up the attitude of some of the political elite towards experts: "Frankly, the people in this country have had enough of experts." This criticism of experts is not new. In 1950, the future Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said, for example about the Monnet Plans: "We have not overthrown the divine right of kings to fall down for the divine right of experts." However, what is new, is the fact that ignorance or lies are no longer discriminating, but on the contrary, are valued by and in the political discourse. This is explained by the emergence of new forms of gullibility which challenge representative democratic practices with the spread of doubt and error in the public arena. For a long time confined to reactionary thinking, conspiracy theories are spreading in all social classes, and it is not unusual for think tanks to be associated with alleged conspiracies. The "democratization" of the marketplace of ideas has resulted in the liberalization of information and the fierce competition between media has specifically resulted in "faulty methods of reasoning becoming public which previously remained private."<sup>8</sup> The resulting relativism amounts to saying that the "truth" would only be a sort of social construct (most often presented in terms of a dominant/dominated report), rather than something recognizable in itself.

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5. D. Drezner, *The Ideas Industry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 65.

6. Created in 1984 in California, TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talks have become one of the main key formats for speeches. They symbolize a means of intervention favored by opinion leaders.

7. T. Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

8. G. Bronner, *La Démocratie des crédules*, Paris: PUF, 2013.

The main difficulty faced by think tanks is having to adapt to an environment that places less and less value on their expertise while continuing to define themselves by this expertise. Should we, therefore, renounce it, as organizations presenting as *do tanks* or solution-generating platforms seem to do? In addition to this profound questioning of expertise, is a phenomenon which, without being new, also substantially changes the theatre of operations: information manipulation, understood “as the intentional and massive distribution of fake news or biased for hostile political purposes.”<sup>9</sup> The quality of public debate depends directly on the information that feeds it. From this point of view, it should be considered as a common good that is essential for democratic functioning and good governance. Yet, think tanks are both targets and vectors for this information manipulation orchestrated by states or interest groups. Manipulation campaigns are repeated tests of their integrity and of their vigilance.

The polarization of the marketplace of ideas can be seen in two ways. From an economic point of view, capitalist concentrations place the think tank industry in an asymmetry that is fundamentally unfavorable. It seems unrealistic to believe that the industry in its entirety is able to move up the value chain of the Ideas Industry. This should encourage individual and/or partnership strategies for organizations whose brands already have an international impact. From a political point of view, the significant investment by authoritarian regimes in their think tanks and the disinvestment of democratic regimes in their own ultimately risks causing deep divisions in an industry, which could well, if its main actors do not take care, result in fragmentation making exchanges between some think tanks impossible.

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The industry is on the verge of profound change, some of whose aspects are already apparent. Robin Niblett, the Director of Chatham House, emphasizes the following paradox: think tanks are distrusted when they have probably never allocated so many resources and so much energy in distributing their work, particularly through social media. After a critical review of mistakes committed in the 1990s and 2000s, he lists and analyses the challenges Western think tanks face to rediscover a common sense of purpose.<sup>10</sup> According to him, they should pursue the following guidelines: encourage debate with analysis built on facts and not on opinions; return to global thinking on major world issues; present themselves as a positive force for change; not only innovate in terms of products but also partnerships; and encourage diversity to come up with credible and

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9. CAPS/IRSEM Report, *Les Manipulations de l'information : un défi pour nos démocraties*, August 2018.

10. R. Niblett, “Rediscovering a Sense of Purpose: The Challenge for Western *Think Tanks*”, *International Affairs*, No. 6, 2018.

sustainable solutions. If the distinction between opinions and facts is obvious, it should encourage rigorous methodological thinking about the patterns required to read the facts and connect them.<sup>11</sup>

These guidelines are also approaches, which illustrate think tankers' will to reflect together on the changes in their profession and industry. These discussions are more important than ever in terms of the dichotomy between "authoritarian think tanks" and "democratic think tanks". His account is essential, as the rise of the Chinese think tanks, which will gradually challenge the legitimacy of their Western counterparts, but which could not by any means discourage contacts and exchanges with them at the risk of exacerbating international rivalries. Generally, avoiding isolation seems to be the rule of behavior for think tanks to follow. Within the Ideas Industry, they maintain a unique comparative advantage: their ability to access the four spheres previously mentioned. They are responsible for growing and diversifying them, while defending all methodological principles in the search for objectivity against all odds. It is the surest way to stand out and be heard.

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11. See in this study T. de Montbrial, "Ifri's profession", pp. 38-46.



# Conclusion

**Thomas Gomart**

The collection of these four articles shows our willingness to reflect on the think tank profession in the long term, which now forms an industry in its own right. Their offer and the demand from public authorities, companies, the media and academia are continuously intensifying and diversifying: requiring us to constantly adapt, and to that end, to promote exchanges in the industry. This is the aim of this publication. Since its foundation in 1979,<sup>71</sup> Ifri has been part of a dual framework – national and international – cooperating with think tanks throughout the world and actively contributing to the main platforms, regularly bringing them together. This ability to establish relationships to foster collective thinking is at the heart of the industry.

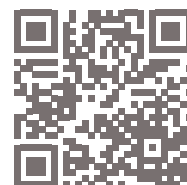
Read continuously, this collection demonstrates the uniqueness of the French position in the think tank community, because of our country's political and administrative culture. There is still some debate if French think tanks should be the manifestation of French voices in the debate of ideas or France's voice with foreign countries' decision-makers. This issue only tends to see their activity in terms of interactions with public authorities at the expense of those with other partners, particularly companies, whereas a think tank like Ifri plans its studies as an aid to decision-making, whether public or private. Nevertheless, think tanks are an integral part of the power competition, both as vectors or as targets of soft power. They play a key role in building international political narratives. They also reflect a country's ability to develop independent analytical and forecasting capabilities, particularly if it belongs to a system of alliances or is subject to foreign pressure. The assertion of independence claimed by most think tanks starts with the ability to produce an attempt at individual thinking. In this era of permanent communication, continuing to think, and therefore to read and write, may perhaps be the main challenge faced by leaders of think tanks, who could run the risk of becoming merely agitators of ideas if they were not careful.

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71. S. Jansen, *Les Boîtes à idées de Marianne. État, expertise et relations internationales en France*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2017.

They must also face the direct challenge to expertise by political leaders, combined with the change in some media now preferring opinions to facts. More significantly, the traditional activity of think tanks is encountering two trends that could really disorientate it. The first feeds on the postmodernism of some academic circles; a postmodernism according to which the reality would depend first and foremost on each individual's perception. Starting from here, the "truth" would be seen more as a social construct than something knowledgeable in itself. The second trend finds its source in the propaganda, disinformation or targeted communication engineered by political, particularly state, or economic actors, in order to distort reality according to their interests. This trend is not new, but the power of information and communication technology now gives it a formidable impact. It is highly likely that think tanks, concerned about research aiming at objectivity and debate aiming at plurality, must work together quickly on these two topics.





27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

[Ifri.org](http://Ifri.org)