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Ievgenii Rovnyi^a

^a Institut für Humangeographie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Birth of Think Tanks, the Invention of Terrorism, and Expert Discourse in the United States

IEVGENII ROVNYI

Institut für Humangeographie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Thomas Medvetz (2012), *Think Tanks in America*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 324 pages. ISBN 978-0-226-51729-2 (hardcover).

Lisa Stampnitzky (2013), *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism"*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 232 pages. ISBN 978-1-107-02663-6 (hardcover).

Studies of geopolitics have paid a great deal of attention to the structures, processes and technologies through which ‘intellectuals of statecraft’ and a multitude of other actors normalise certain narratives, policies and strategies as a legitimate way of knowing the world and acting upon it. This effort has much in common with recent work in the sociology of knowledge. The hallmark of this highly heterogeneous literature has been an historical and institutional reconstruction of the emergence and operation of intricate constellations of knowledge and power. Critical geopolitics scholars have been wary, in this regard, not so much of offering accounts of a different kind of ‘geopolitics’ – of those there have been plenty (consider, for instance, all the qualifiers of the word) – but of providing empirically grounded explanations of how things came to be defined as they are and done the way they were. To bring this sociological work into sharper focus, two studies of expert knowledge in the US merit a review.

Thomas Medvetz’s *Think Tanks in America*, the first of the two, is a genealogy of the phenomenon of the ‘think tank’ and the concomitant transformations of the structures of knowledge production in the US. The author

Address correspondence to Ievgenii Rovnyi, Institut für Humangeographie, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Grüneburgplatz 1, PEG-Gebäude, Frankfurt am Main 60323, Germany. E-mail: rovnyi@em.uni-frankfurt.de

turns what is sometimes hastily compressed into one sentence – the definition of a think tank – into a thorough empirical investigation presented on 226 pages, followed by another hundred pages of figures and tables, notes and bibliography. In structuring the material collected through archival research, interviews and first-hand observations, he pieces together what makes a think tank and how it emerged, what intellectual practices it carries out and how they matter in the policy debate, with the final chapter considering what it all means for academia.

The larger part of the study confronts the phenomenon of the think tank as a research problem that allows for experimental thinking in terms of relations, networks, assemblages, topologies, blurring boundaries, and hybrids. The book's approach is heavily informed by Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and refined by the latest work of such scholars as Loïc Wacquant and Gil Eyal. It allows Medvetz to abandon both popular and academic present-day understandings of think tanks and to treat instead the space they inhabit as a precarious outcome that needs to be explained. Like other studies of think tanks, *Think Tanks in America* goes back to the early 1900s to unearth these organisations' roots. Unlike those studies that conclude that think tanks became ideological and politicised from the 1960s onward, however, Medvetz argues that it was in that period that a distinct hybrid think tank 'species' emerged as such. It arose as 'technoscientific' and 'activist' experts became oriented toward each other in their work and as the very label 'think tank' gained currency as an umbrella term for these organisations. This 'crystallization of the space of think tanks' occurred furthermore as part of broader ideological and institutional struggles in the twentieth-century United States.

The author's account of the birth of think tanks as an interstitial field has consequences for their conceptualisation. Medvetz breaks on that score with typological and substantialist approaches that tend to essentialise think tanks, e.g., as 'universities without students' or 'lobbying firms in disguise'. Instead, he highlights the space of think tanks as coming into being through their dynamic relations with and their cognitive and material dependence on the more established institutions, those from academic, political, economic and media fields. Other than situating think tanks in these fields of power and, conversely, these rationalities of power inside of the think tank, Medvetz ultimately accentuates the significance of the relationships among think tanks.

This relational theorising significantly raises the level of the discussion and overcomes both overly celebratory and utterly devastating tones in the earlier studies of think tanks. Yet what is arguably the most distinguishing feature of *Think Tanks in America* is a meticulously empirical description of the phenomenon and an inside look into the world of US think tanks – behind the half-drawn curtains, as the book cover rightly suggests. To excel in this world, argues Medvetz, policy experts operate with a disparate array of resources and through manifold styles of work such as being a 'wunk'

with outstanding technical skills and credentials or a ‘hack’ with media savvy and salesmanship abilities (p. 174). The extensive presentation of the think tank–affiliated experts’ remarks on their daily routines renders expertise furthermore as an embodied practice: experts emotionally swear while watching television (p. 4); they drink wine, eat cheese, and get into awkward situations (p. 173). To give an even better sense of this world, the author takes the reader on a walk through the District of Columbia expounding on how “the physical layout of think tanks within the city”, their clustering around, e.g., the State Department or on Capitol Hill, is often indicative of their ties and orientations in their work (p. 118). The full potential of the empirical insight is possibly restrained, however, by the author’s goal to build ‘a theory of think tanks’ and to find that “general force that compels them to become ‘hybrid’” (p. 137).

Medvetz raises eventually the central question in the literature on think tanks – that of their influence. To this end, he traces the dynamics of the expert discourse on deprivation and dependency prior to the enactment of the 1996 welfare reform legislation. The author detects the connection between the institutional changes of knowledge production in the US in the 1960s through the 1980s and the triumph of the dependency welfare problematic. His eventual claim is that think tanks have come to wield their power primarily through their ability to shape “the terms of the debate itself” by reordering the social structure of knowledge production and consumption, which has in turn effectively marginalised social scientists in the policymaking process (p. 210). This insight leads to an unexpected conclusion of the study. Against the common wisdom that think tanks serve as bridges and promote an interchange between policymaking and academic scholarship, Medvetz argues that they instead reinforce this division.

The second book, Lisa Stampnitzky’s *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”*, is an account of the emergence of the category of ‘terrorism’ and the production of expert discourse on terrorism at the boundary between political and academic practice. Narrating in detail the history of terrorism studies in the US context, the author succinctly doles out her arguments and extensive empirical data, including figures and tables, on some 200 pages, followed by a 20-page reference list. The documentary evidence and numerous quotes come from the sources as diverse as archival records, official reports, newspapers, academic publications, conference proceedings, and interviews with experts from academia, think tanks and government. Linking discursive analysis of terrorism to the assemblage of concrete events, people and relationships, Stampnitzky shows how the unruly phenomenon of terrorism has been rendered manageable through practices of definition and specific techniques of knowing and refusing to know. She draws conceptually on the work of such writers as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour, taking further clues from the writings of Judith Butler, James Scott and the interdisciplinary studies of expertise.

Stampnitzky unhurriedly unpacks how terrorism came to mean what it does today. She begins with an observation that what today is labelled with far-reaching consequences as terrorism used to be treated as a routine criminal matter before the 1970s. Yet by the end of that decade, the kind of political violence that was deemed fundamentally immoral started to be referred to as terrorism and those committing it – terrorists. In a largely chronological fashion, Stampnitzky traces how this terrorism discourse was ‘invented’ and how it evolved. She argues that it took shape through the partition of the insurgency discourse as an ever-closer network of experts differentiated terrorism from insurgent activities by conceptualising it as illegitimate violence and as the production of terrorism expertise moved from a relatively ‘quiet’ governmental site to the public realm. In the late Cold War period, terrorism was further recast as a civilisational struggle between ‘the West’ and the international network of terrorists ‘backed by the Soviet Union’, which led to a respective policy of military retaliation under Ronald Reagan. In the 1990s, new experts produced a ‘new’ terrorism discourse that sought to conceive of Islam as the ‘number one national enemy’ and that was framed around the fears of ‘mass destruction’. The three decades of the shifting meanings and policies accompanied by the occurrence of new dramatic events eventually paved the way for the enactment of the pre-emptive logic of the ‘war on terror’. The somewhat over-saturated narrative becomes livelier as it gets closer to the kind of terrorism discourse dominant after 9/11 so that the last two chapters read under one breath and it is hard to accept that it is the end of the story.

Disciplining Terror shows how the discourse of ‘terrorism’ has had constraining effects on the scope of expert knowledge about it. Despite the efforts to make it knowable and governable – through legal codification, simulation of disasters, scenario writing, quantification and modelling – terrorism has resisted rationalisation because the assumptions about morality and rationality have been interwoven with the very construction of legitimate knowledge claims about it. The author attributes the ongoing conflict over ‘politicization’ in terrorism studies to the field being “an interstitial arena that crosses multiple institutional and organizational boundaries” (p. 14). The result is not only that terrorism expertise has not been fully ‘disciplined’ – hence the title of the book – and that there is no settled definition. With knowledge about terrorism being shaped both by the attempts at scientific analysis and by the claims of morality in the public sphere, the key problem with this liminal setting is that experts are not able to control the discourse they produce.

The author acknowledges that this situation is not unique to terrorism expertise, with her work thus addressing the broader studies of expert knowledge. It is indeed not terrorism per se that animates the story of *Disciplining Terror* but the expertise on it. With the literature on terrorism being vast and interdisciplinary, including a growing number of

programmatic and critical texts in geography, the enterprise of studying terrorism expertise may appear provocative, or even absurd. Yet, as with science and technology studies, the purpose of the inquiry into academic and other expert discourses is not to debunk science and expertise, but to get closer to understanding what expert knowledge is, how its boundaries are enacted and what it performs. Stampnitzky does just that in her work, which comes across most clearly in the closing pages. In what she calls 'the politics of anti-knowledge', expert claims that deviated from the 'evil' terrorism line of the George W. Bush administration and that sought to account for the reasons behind the attacks were likely to be frantically dismissed as justification of and sympathy with terrorists. Her concluding thought traces the underlying dynamic behind such reactions back to the relation between expert knowledge and the state. Contrary to the claim that governance in the 'modern era' is based on the rationalisation of government and the making of territories and populations legible, Stampnitzky contends that 'terrorism' has been eventually rendered manageable through the rejection of the very possibility of knowing it.

Although the two books do not deal directly with either foreign policy or the interplay of space and power, students of critical geopolitics will encounter many familiar organisations and individuals there, e.g., *Reader's Digest*, Committee on the Present Danger, Project for a New American Century, Samuel Huntington, Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, etc. (Medvetz, pp. 105, 142, 147, 192; Stampnitzky, pp. 68, 87, 142, 170). While most of these names are associated with conservative ideas and agendas, the two books challenge those approaches that put ideological struggles at the centre of their analysis of the entanglements of knowledge and power. *Disciplining Terror* explicitly contests the idea that an ideologically homogeneous group of experts controls the production of the terrorism discourse in order to legitimise and maintain state hegemony. *Think Tanks in America* empirically undermines the assumption that think tanks are predetermined to be the hotbeds of the right-wing thinking, as the examples of the Institute for Policy Studies and many other left-leaning think tanks demonstrate (e.g., p. 171).

Medvetz's and Stampnitzky's studies make therefore important contributions well beyond their discipline and specialised foci on think tanks and terrorism experts. They amply offer a stimulating reflection on the intricate operation of expertise in contemporary societies. Their approach toward expert knowledge permits to articulate, by way of conclusion, two related preoccupations that have recently provoked some soul-searching in critical geopolitics. One concerns the possibility of practicing a different sort of 'critique', the kind whose relevance lies in elucidation through systematic empirical observation rather than primarily in the provision of a counter-discourse or condemnation (cf. Stampnitzky, pp. 10, 127, 202). The other is a move in critical geopolitics toward greater reflexivity on the expertise it

does, not in the sense of bringing in more dubiousness and conceptual frustration, but reflexivity as awareness of the sources and relation of scholarly ideas to the broader pertinent practices in society (cf. Medvetz, pp. 42, 184). Both developments point to what the historians of geography have abundantly demonstrated – that it is not only the concepts and discourses that geographers study but also those they rely on in their own work that are anything but constant, innocent or intrinsically valid.