On Think Tanks Academic Session

Abstracts

# Strategies pursued by Mexican think tanks to reach the general public

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Mexican think tanks and experts employ an increasingly varied array of strategies to reach out to the general public and, in this way, indirectly influence policy makers too. Among these strategies, the most important include the following: a wider and more professional presence in mass media (news and TV outlets) to create an opinion favorable to the public policies they endorse; communication teams to spread the results of their research and disseminate the ideas they produce; educational activities to propagate certain values (particularly, those revolving around human and collective rights, justice, free markets, free enterprise and liberty); public debates to persuade key public officials; motivational speeches to persuade special audiences; building up observatories not only to monitor issues of public interest but, more importantly, to shape collective ideas and preferences; an increasingly more intense social activism around public problems of different sort (such as corruption, violence, impunity, migration, drugs, among others); and advocacy activities to protect vulnerable populations and defend social and political values. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to determine if the strategies pursued by Mexican think tanks depend on their political and ideological alignments, and second to examine whether strategies also vary according the audience they try to reach. Regarding the first, it is argued that although the main tendency is to combine in different ways the strategies above mentioned, liberal and right wing think tanks focus on social activism and advocacy, while more technocratic neoliberal think tanks prefer setting up observatories, expand their presence in the media and public debates. Regarding the second purpose, Mexican think tanks target, among their main audiences, public officials, congressmen, and public opinion in general; and their strategies also depend on the audience they try to reach. Public officials and congressmen are reached through briefings, meetings and audiences; public opinion is reached through the media and public debates. Younger generations have become key targets among right wing think tanks that wish to influence them through education and motivational activities.

Book: British think tanks and the 2008 financial crisis

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Not only did the financial collapse of 2008 have momentous effects on the global economy and the political situation of Britain and of much of the world, it also elicited a profound and ongoing crisis of confidence in the capacity of experts to understand, let alone manage, our social and economic future. Even so, experts became ever more influential, as a diagnosis of what went wrong was urgently demanded by politicians and wider publics.

In this context, think tanks are particularly fascinating, in account of their multifarious character and their double character: intellectual and institutional. Accordingly, this book compares the parallel transformations of four widely different British think tanks between 2007 and 2013.

Drawing from current sociological theories on think tanks and knowledge, this book devises a novel theoretical and methodological framework to study intellectual institutions through their public interventions. By analysing policy reports, annual accounts, and media presence, and informed by interviews to current and former members of staff, this book traces the public interventions of these organisations across time to detect the transformations they reveal of both organisations themselves and of their environment.

Ultimately, the demands for expert knowledge that arose after the crisis energised the work of all four think tanks, while exposing internal tensions, affecting their sources of funding, transforming their institutional structure, and opening and closing avenues for influence. Faced with these pressures and in a context of crisis of expert authority, I argue that these organisations modified their mode of engagement in order to negotiate their position in an ever more fractious public debate.

Partisan think tanks: informed policy programmes or political recruitment?

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Even if Argentina has numerous external think tanks, political parties, beyond some foundations linked to certain leaderships and of poor durability, have failed to consolidate partisan think tanks that help shape their programmatic horizon. The lack of partisan think tanks in the country comes from the hand of the absence of studies on these institutions and their links with political parties. Created in 2005 with the aim to underpin the growth of the party Republican Proposal, Pensar Foundation was relaunched in 2010 with the objective of designing government plans in case Mauricio Macri, leader and candidate of the party, achieved a victory in the 2011 presidential elections. The objective of this research is to understand the think tank’s contribution to the party’s growth and victory in 2015 elections as well as the mechanisms that linked the institute to the party.

Neoliberal think tank networks in Latin America: strategic replication and cross-national organizing

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It is widely accepted that policy related research and consulting by think tanks plays a major role in the policy making process . Based on individual country and comparative studies, the innovative character of think tank expertise is stressed in relation to national epistemic cultures. In contrast to mainstream think tank research the input challenges prevalent methodological nationalism by way of examining the transnational dimensions of partisan think tank networks. While the founding and networking as such can be considered an example of “strategic replication” necessary to advance discourses in the global, regional, and national knowledge power structures, cross national organizing ties the separate elements together and allows for the transnational diffusion and translation of ideas, concepts, and social technologies in policy making. The input focuses on five neoliberal think tank networks in Latin America and presents some political topics and initiatives in the political agenda setting that are replicated across borders.

The EVITA framework: Development of a new combined framework for mental health research evidence into policymaking and agenda setting in low- and middle-income countries

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Background The burden of mental illness is excessive, but many countries lack poicies to change practice. Knowledge translation into mental health policymaking is a wicked problem, often failing despite a robust evidence base. A recent systematic review of theories and frameworks on research evidence and policymaking for mental health in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) identified gaps in agenda setting and actionability. Pragmatic, predictive and effective tools to guide action for research evidence and policymaking interrelations are needed. This paper describes the development of the EVITA (EVidence To Policy Agenda-setting) Framework

Methods. We performed a framework review to identify elements and processes, and drafted a new provisional conceptual framework for mental health research and policy interrelationships in LMICs. We conducted expert in-depth interviews with the aim to (a) confirm relevance of the components, (b) validate the process flow, (c) assess intelligibility, functionality, relevance, applicability, and effectiveness of the draft framework. We used thematic coding to identify themes and revised the framework in an iterative process.

The role of China’s think tanks and universities in China’s foreign policy towards Africa: a rising epistemic community?

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Along with the deepening of China’s political and commercial interactions with Africa since the

mid-1990s, a range of non-governmental actors have been increasingly involved in China’s foreign policy-making. Among them, universities and think tanks in particular have been playing a more active role. Three main factors have contributed to this change: the emergence of unexpected political challenges and growing economic interests at stakes in Africa (with the consequent need for specific expertise and knowledge); the empowerment of scholars (as a consequence of the decentralization of foreign policy decision-making started in the 1980s); and a renewed vision of experts and think tanks as a political tool conducive to China’s soft diplomacy. In the 21st century, China’s Africa watchers at universities and think tanks have gradually become central actors in China’s foreign policy towards Africa: on the one side, they have acquired a number of instruments to influence both public opinion and policy decisions (publications; “collective leader sessions”, etc.); on the other hand, they have become more and more engaged in international networks, as well as in political learning processes involving African counterparts (academic exchanges, vocational trainings etc.).

While a large body of scholarship in the last years has presented China’s think tanks features (Shambaugh, 2002), their roles (Bonnie, Saunders, 2002) and even attempted to demonstrate their policy impact (Bondiguel, Kellner, 2010; Zhu, 2009), however, to date only few studies have been made with regards to the growing community of Chinese experts on Africa and their views (Alden; Large, 2015; Carayannis, Olin, 2012; Corkin, 2014;). This presentation seeks to shed light on this community and on the different forms of their engagement, in order to show how new strategies of intellectual interventions have emerged under the framework of a renewed South-South cooperation. Over the past decade, various social and political transformations have in fact substantially changed the way Chinese scholars interact with both the government and other intellectual communities. We argue that China’s Africa watchers have been constituting an increasingly active epistemic community, moved by a specific vision of their role. In our perspective, they indeed represent an interesting case worth to be analysed in reason of the importance that Africa has assumed in China’s Africa policy as well as of their contextualization in the framework of a South-South cooperation.

(In)formal diplomacy after all? Regional Security Dialogues as Discursive Space: A Comparative Analysis in Europe and Asia.

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The proliferation of regional security dialogues in the last two decades has been driven largely by the interconnected nature of emerging security issues. The term regional security dialogue draws to mind state-organized conference and events; however, an under-appreciated sub-set of dialogues are organized by non-governmental actors. These informal forums have developed in line with, and sometimes in competition to, state-sanctioned processes. This article examines the emergence of independently organized forums and the actors behind their development. It also seeks to understand why some non-state forums have been more effective at fostering regional dialogue than formal processes with the same goals. Drawing from discursive institutionalism, this article develops two innovative concepts: discursive space and discursive quality. It applies these concepts to two very successful informal dialogues, the Shangri-La Dialogue and the Munich Security Conference. These concepts lay the groundwork for an empirical analysis of regional dialogues, the ultimate aim of which is to improve our understanding of the factors that differentiate effective dialogue locations from mere policy ‘talk shops’. This article produces the first cross regional comparative analysis of non-state security dialogues and develops additional tools to aid our understanding of the role of non-state actors in regional security governance.

From Idea to institution, the emergence of regulatory network in Iran

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Over the last decade, Iran has experienced a large policy change in regulatory governance. This paper aims to explore how the emergence of advocacy coalition creation has shaped this policy change and facilitated the formation of the regulatory network in Iran. Historically, market regulation was a periphery task of the government in Iran and delivering services to citizens directly or via contract was at the heart of most government agencies. Following the recent advances in the concept of governance in Iran, specialized governmental organizations were developed and focused on regulatory tasks. In particular, some state regulatory organizations such as Consumer and Producer Protection Organization (CPPO), National Competition Council (NCC) and Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA) were established. The foundation of these organizations, however, is a small step towards the establishment of a regulatory network in Iran. The General Policies of Article 44 of the Constitution, pertaining in May 2005, can be considered as a milestone in formation of a comprehensive regulatory system in Iran. Despite this large step, formation of a regulatory system faced lots of frictions. An insightful case is the NCC which is established in Apr. 2010 due to the Law on Implementation of General Policies of Article 44. Although NCC was authorized to establish a series of sectorial independent regulators, over a decade all the efforts for this purpose failed. Later on and following some policy changes, the way to establish regulatory bodies facilitated notably.

In this paper, we try to shed light on the main aspects of these policy changes. As we discuss, we attribute a large part of frictions in the path of regulatory formation to the failure of policy coalition. Respectively, efforts to resolve this fraud had a large contribution in facilitating the formation of sectorial regulators.

In general, policy is made through a complex process where hundreds of participants interact in the context of interdependent political environments with nested institutional arrangements, uneven power relations, and uncertain scientific and technical information about problems and alternative solutions. In line with Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1999) and Policy Paradigm (Hall, 1993) perspectives, and as we discuss, coalition creation plays the main role in this regulatory change in Iran. Central to that coalition creation was an epistemic community of social science graduates in Sharif University of Technology. Academic researches and conferences, building networks, impacts on legal frameworks and code of conducts and formation of Governance and Policy Think Tank made this coalition impressive. This coalition could be effective in changing the process of sectorial regulatory authority establishment by the NCC and other authorities. This is mainly occurred in the first step in energy, audiovisual and pension fund sectors.