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MAY
2019

GRAPPLING WITH DISSENT: how can think tanks cope with politicisation?

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For too long, think tanks have been studying and explaining the fundamental consensuses in our societies and political systems, while addressing their transformation only tangentially. The sector is mired in an identity crisis produced by a two-pronged shift in the field of applied knowledge: opposition to "experts" has emerged at the same time as our societies have become more politicised. Distrust of conventional power structures is also sweeping the knowledge sector. For a long time, think tanks have been responsible for fostering the connection between expert knowledge and decision-making processes. Midway between academia and politics, these centres of thought have transferred rigorous study to political praxis, both in terms of discourse and public policy.

When politics fell into crisis, intermediaries were among the first casualties. Challenging the prevailing political order and questioning the social role of experts combined to erode the relevance of think tanks. Experts have been the target of populist attacks. In the Brexit campaign, Leave leaders proclaimed "we have had enough of experts", while Donald Trump casted doubt on climate change when extremely low temperatures hit the United States during the polar vortex –and when evidence demonstrates that extreme temperatures are the consequence of climate change. In a context of a generalised challenging of the political order, the questioning of experts and think tanks has been exacerbated by the instruments of misinformation, "fake news" and post-truth politics.

Another factor in the recent decline in think tanks' social relevance is the high degree of specialisation in the sector. For a long time, the studies based on technical knowledge were prioritised in order to gain traction among decision-makers. "Policy recommendations" have become a near obligatory final section of think tank reports, sometimes to the detriment of these studies' broader capacity for social influence.

The trend towards linking the work of think tanks with political decisions contrasts with the difficulty of conducting detailed follow-up of public policies, as researchers are rarely able connect to the day-to-day decision-making processes. The disjuncture between think tanks and political influence creates a double risk: irrelevance in the eyes of political decision-makers and distancing from society as a whole.

Social detachment is a problem for academia as well as for think tanks. As the academic world, particularly political science, has privileged rigour over relevance, and academicism over social needs, its social utility has diminished. Desch writes that "objectivity precludes policy engagement because the latter is inextricably linked with questions of value", and if anything prevails in the current political crisis it is debates that are deeply normative, ideologised and polarised.

Producing texts in formats that are barely digestible by the general public and of great technical complexity has not benefited the social relevance of research. Think tanks whose survival depends on the achievement and execution of research projects financed by public authorities have been more exposed to this risk than those with their own generous philanthropic financing. Another factor is the increased competition in the "expertise" sector, with a growing number of journalist-analysts and academics with a public vocation.

Adding to the process of contesting the role of think tanks is the politicisation of our societies, which may be seen as an opportunity. Interest in international and European politics has been growing in recent years, largely due to the effects of the crisis in the international order in general, and European integration in particular.

The euro crisis, the refugee crisis, Brexit and the European Union's democratic deficit signal the end of a permissive consensus on European integration and the emergence of a level of dissent that restricts decision-making capacity. Exercising political leadership is also much more difficult today at both national and European levels due to the growing public scrutiny of our leaders.

Following Grande and Hutter, the international and European agendas have gained importance in the eyes of our fellow citizens. The awareness of a greater centrality of these agendas in our daily life has mobilised the electorate around issues that are not strictly national in nature. In the European case, this politicisation may become an opportunity to rethink the project as a whole, along with the public policies that emerge from it. This is a healthy development for any mature and consolidated political project like today's European Union.

The effects of politicisation have also increased where the links between the international (or European) and the local have been strengthened. When it comes to migration or the role of cities as global actors, the separation between the international and the domestic has faded. The same is true in the security field where, for example, the EU's Global Strategy notes the close link between internal security (civil protection, trafficking and terrorism) and external security (deriving from international crises and conflicts). The more unity there is between the local and the international, the more likely is the politicisation of political agendas.

The challenging of experts and the politicisation of the agenda combine to give a new social meaning to think tanks as centres of thought. When political leaders – who used to advocate their social utility – attack them from populist positions, the response should be to regain their original purpose: to revalorise their usefulness as a public good in the face of ill-intentioned questioning of informed policy.

This does not mean falling into complacency. Think tanks today face the challenge not so much of providing policy recommendations but of presenting grand narratives and ideas to motivate and mobilise a disoriented society. They should avoid analysing only what is politically correct or enjoys broad social consensus, because it is precisely these consensuses that have been disappearing.

Think tank research agendas should therefore promote the study of issues that concern the society in which they operate, making use of the attacks they have

faced to reverse the trend of generalised contestation, and thereby improve their social relevance and utility. The growing citizen interest in European and international issues works in their favour, and as they are perceived as internal issues, they already prompt greater desires for opinion and participation.

In short, these centres of reflection must shift from acting as a link between academia and politics towards fostering a greater connection between politics and society. Faced with growing politicisation, today's think tanks should be centres of thought that are open to society, encourage the use of new formats, find new audiences and return to society part of what it invests in them (especially centres that receive public funding). In times of increasing contestation and politicisation, revindicating their social utility also means defending their rigour and independence within their field of specialisation.