

By Geert Lovink

How can we imagine to do radical research outside of the established academic institutions and large mainstream media? Is this possible anyway? For decades this has been my dream. At first, my 1980s generation imagined this as an intellectual practice that was allocated deep inside the social movements. This was mostly investigative journalism, activist research into corporations, extreme-right wing networks and organizations, nuclear energy deals and related lobby campaigns of companies such as Shell that supported the apartheid regime in South-Africa. This type of indy-research was done to inform the movements themselves and provide them with information in the fight for the hearts and minds of the people (sometimes confused by us with 'public opinion').

In Amsterdam there was a separate autonomous research collective that monitored racists and neo-fascists (FOK), a group that followed police and secret service activities (Jansen & Jansen) and one that investigated speculation and gentrification in the city (SPOK). My own band of gypsies can be considered the theory and humanities arm of the movement (ADILKNO). In some cases the groups were linked to specific archives or magazines, as was the case with radical feminism. The last thing these research collectives want to do was to produce dull policy papers.

I never thought of the need to start a 'think-tank'—and over the years I started to wonder why. Perhaps it was enough to be in a collective? But in this term there is no explicit link to thinking. The thinking didn't seem to be very sexy, neither was it to be situating your group inside a tank. But then, why call yourself a foundation (a legal term, controlled by lawyers and notaries) or an institute for that manner, the very symbol of one's desire to be part of official reality and its 'institutionalization'. Non-governmental organizations were not on the radar back then. NGOs were associated with United Nations and ministries. Their 'non' was often a farce.

I got immediately inspired when I heard about the *Better Think Tank Project* of the Munich art duo Ralf Homann and Manuela Unverdorben. Their project investigates the politics and aesthetics of think tanks as a dominant form of knowledge production. What's the appeal of the motor behind the current innovation madness? Are think tanks deadly boring? Why should we copy-paste such forms and mimic their socio-spatial culture (such as 'the office')?

Since 2005 I have been working with Ned Rossiter on the idea of 'organized networks' and I consider this a contribution, albeit from the opposite direction as I associate think tanks with bricks 'n' mortar spaces. Organized networks, on the other hand, are tight virtual networks, defined by their 'strong ties', with dispersed contributors that do without expensive office spaces. But wait a minute. Aren't these brave 'orgnet' comrades condemned to spend their days in co-working spaces, in cafes and at home at the kitchen table? How did we end up in such a neo-liberal trap? We urgently need new forms to conspire. One of the many ways to get there is the deconstruction of hegemonic formats. How can we envision the radical or post think-tank-as-a-form? Time for a dialogue via e-mail.

Q: There are virtually no leftist, radical think tanks. All of them seem mainstream by default. How would you explain this?

A: Let's start with an anecdote. When the entrepreneur Anthony Fisher wanted to use his fortune to influence British politics and asked Friedrich von Hayek which party to support, he got the hint not to waste time and gain instead decisive influence in the battle of ideas by funding research in structural forms like think tanks. Think tanks are a better tool to persist the myth of an objective truth.

The success of right wing or radical market oriented think tanks, the kind of think tanks that we as BTTP are researching for more than 10 years now, is a matter of organization. They are embedded in transnational well-organized networks, newly established think tanks are getting financial and intellectual support for an effective start, a kind of toolkit of advice, and, as a crucial point, they are financially backed by corporations (e.g. ExxonMobile, Philip Morris or in Germany Bertelsmann) or rich private entrepreneurs (Koch brothers). Another important characteristic is that they operate with both short term and long term goals. Already in 1944 Friedrich von Hayek stated "that the most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of the people. This is necessarily a slow affair, a process which extends not over a few years but perhaps over one or two generations."

As all these ideas need institutional intermediation to become active, it is essential that also prominent political figures are part of the network, think of Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan. Or, as a more contemporary connection, Donald Trump and the strong supporter of his "political program", the Heritage Foundation.

Other strong networks in this sense are the Mont Pelèrin Society (a transatlantic network of academics, businessmen, journalists and activists founded 1947), the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA, 1955, the “original free-market think tank”) or the Atlas Network (established 1981 by the chicken farmer Anthony Fisher, with around 458 partners in 96 countries).

Q: Progressive types do think and gather their thoughts... Is this a question of language and labels or is there more to it?

A: It’s a common misunderstanding that think tanks are actually creative units, let alone were established with this intention. Think tanks label themselves “independent” but still push their backers agenda and accomplish credibility by pretending to be neutral and to conduct serious research. However, instead of actual academic research they operate as echo chambers, multipliers of the neoliberal ideological agenda. There is no real eagerness in thinking up new ideas, because they already possess the “truth”. Instead, they aim to influence public opinion, to intervene in policy-making and to spread their program.

Q: The free software initiative dyne.org calls itself a think-and-do tank. Is that a solution to actually produce stuff in order not to get stuck in the paper reality of policy making?

A: Dyne.org is a good example for our view as they aim on community empowerment, in contrary to the above mentioned think tanks. Dyne.org is a place of inspiration and development of really new tools, they do not repeat the mantra of the free market. Like many leftist or critical groups they know that the crucial principle for self-empowerment is to do, “to-think-and-do”, to act.

Q: Can you describe the ups and downs of artists dealing with the think-tank model? Is it again out of fashion?

A: Over the years, a lot of think tanks by artists adopted the idea of the think tank as a supposed intellectual, interdisciplinary platform to brood over problems, to foster exchange or find solutions. Which sounds good in the first moment. It still is a fashionable term. Can protagonists of the art field like museums or artists free themselves from the underlying right-wing connotations of the term? In our opinion, it is highly questionable to use the concept without reflecting on a whole cluster of problems. The organizational form of think tanks is not suitable to discuss the problems of

the future in an open and unbiased way.

In our work, “The Better Think Tank Project (BTTP)”, we directly research the phenomenon of “think tanks” and their networks: their achievements, reflection of their hidden agenda, focusing on their aesthetic appearances, cultural influence and the production of knowledge. Combining facts and fiction, the language, corporate designs and events from existing free-market oriented think tanks with new contents, this becomes the starting point for a better understanding and critique. We think more deeply, more broadly, and more soundly! Of course.

Q: There is a certain formal, corporate style associated with think tanks, such as wearing suits and showing boring power points with a lot of bullet points. You have used all these elements in your work. A lot of the NGO workers that end up in the policy environment had to adopt to these social dress codes. Do people despise the bland aesthetics of this particular office culture? What’s the fun of it?

A: Our power point lectures are of course never boring, but insightful and exciting! Full of profound experiences! In our artistic work we appropriate the aesthetics, the visual appearance and the diction of think tanks. We transfer popular events and formats, like the Liberty Café, the Capitalist Ball or the Freedom Dinner, from existing free-market oriented think tanks and fill them with new contents. It is an over-affirmative appropriation, which creates irritations by little incongruous details. To dance at the Capitalist Ball is a lot of fun! But be beware of misunderstandings. If it should happen that the think tank dress code would change to hoodies then we also would reflect on that. Still, we watch the developments in the NGO field critically, especially when NGOs are acting as think tanks. Progressive movements should be based on solidarity and organizational forms of solidarity.

Q: Influence of lobby organizations such as the Montpelerin Society seems real. Activist transparency groups make an effort to map their activities. Do you think regulation, such as lobby registers, actually works?

A: Yes, to show that, covering up network connections makes sense. It’s a very small first step. For example, in our exhibition “Liberty Café” in Cologne we introduced the activities of German Lobby Control, and focused on the influence of the consultancy industry on the German federal government. From our point of view it is more important to generate new methods to revise contemporary knowledge production and distribution. This

also includes highlighting the exertion of influence of think tanks in universities and schools under the pretext of independent academic research or the practice to appear as surveyors and experts in media discourses.

Let's have a look at a current example. The Friedrich A. von Hayek Gesellschaft (Society), connects, among others, to the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung (foundation of the German Liberal Party) and the far right Alternative für Deutschland—AfD. Three seats at the German Parliament are taken by AfD politicians who are also members of the Friedrich A. von Hayek Gesellschaft. Watch the consequences, there is a political far right-wing, but radical free-market program. For instance, in March 2018 Swiss citizens voted on the abolition of their public broadcasting (SRG). The initiative against the SRG was started by Swiss followers of Friedrich von Hayek's ideas. In a way this is a repetition of old long term goals from the 1950s. The above mentioned Institute of Economic Affairs promoted the break-up of the BBC as a first step to destroy all public services in the UK

URLs:

<https://www.khm.de/termine/news.2200.the-better-think-tank-project-bhttp-liberty-caf-29-01-bis-24-02-2013/>

<http://manuelaunverdorben.de/bhttp.html>

<http://manuelaunverdorben.de/capitalist%20Ball.html>

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