Organisations and Policy-Relevant Knowledge Production

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The contested role knowledge plays—and should play—in policymaking has become an area of growing interest and research. In a context of rising scrutiny on the policy impact of academic research, many pages have been dedicated to assessing what kind of knowledge-claims can assert policy relevance. At the same time, at the crossroads between sociology and policy studies, debates on the role of evidence in policymaking have highlighted the distance between how academia and policymaking operate, signalling an important gap between the 'best available knowledge' and the knowledge that is actually used to inform, substantiate or legitimise public policy (Boswell 2009). As a consequence, at the interface between policy and expertise lies some of the most salient recent developments within science and technology studies, the sociology of knowledge and policy studies. To mention two: the rich literature on the link between science and policy advanced by Jasanoff (1995) and the work around the new mode of knowledge production explored by Gibbons et al. (1994).

Correspondingly, there is a growing push within the social sciences to understand how organisations and institutional frameworks mediate between knowledge, policy and practice. One can mention here Tom Medvetz's (2012) research on the murky character of think tanks, Campbell and Pedersen's (2011) work on knowledge regimes and John Holmwood's (2014) research on British universities and the agenda for impact. However, there is little comparative work on how diverse types of institutional arrangements shape the type of knowledge different forms of organisations actually produce; in terms of their scope, their position taking, their claims to objectivity and their perceived rigour (see Williams 2018 for one exception). And indeed, factors such as institutional capacities, organisational structures, symbolic capital and funding regimes undoubtedly influence the form of the 'product': expertise with claims to epistemic authority, that is, the capacity to produce knowledge that others can responsibly base their decisions on.

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Hence, with the purpose of connecting the aforementioned debates within a comparative framework, this special issue delves into the institutional conditions of possibility for the production of policy-relevant knowledge across different types of organisation. Through an exploration of the work of policy knowledge institutions, this issue will provide an overview of the current debates on the parts different kinds of organisations play in producing knowledge that seeks to inform policymaking, as well as on the shape and format such knowledge takes. We seek to attain this through an engagement with current developments in organisational sociology and the sociology of intellectuals—especially in its shift from intellectual actors to their interventions taken by Baert (2015), Eyal and Buchholz (2010) and Sapiro (2009).

Amine Brahimi offers an analysis of the relationship between an influential public intellectual, Mohammed Arkoun, with a specific research context, the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. His approach focuses on the way their interactions developed and evolved through time, rather than on the structure of their relations. Making use of the Weberian concept of elective affinity, the paper examines the relationship between the worldviews and the interests of a social group, offering insights into the reciprocal elements that pull together social actors and particular institutions. His observational ethnographic inquiry and interviews shed light on the convergence between Arkoun and the Institute of Ismaili Studies, which centred around the mutual development of a common belief.

Where Brahimi develops an argument around one specific relationship between intellectual and institution, Maite de Cea provides a field-level analysis that offers insights into the transformation of expertise more generally. Examining two of Chile's most prominent sociological experts, her paper provides an account of how Chilean cultural expertise developed from that of an expert intellectual to that of an expert professional. Her paper charts the shift from 'experts in culture' to 'professionals in culture', whereby increasing professionalisation is evidenced by the progressively specialised, technical and global nature of the Chilean cultural field. Showing how intellectual knowledge becomes integrated into technical and professionalised parts of cultural policy, de Cea provides a compelling account of a shift from the global expert intellectual to the professional public policy expert.

Moving away from the contributions of specific intellectuals, Jordan Tchilingirian examines an increasingly prominent organisational type: the think tank. Also employing a field-oriented approach, his paper explores how think tanks gain credibility via navigation of a complex network of relationships across established fields and professions. By investigating how British think-tank researchers construct policy papers, he provides an account of how these specific experts engage with the multiple professions that comprise the policy nexus. The paper argues that think tanks must carefully engage in ongoing positioning and repositioning to remain credible at the intersection of the worlds of academia, politics, journalism and business. Crucially, this account demonstrates how think-tank researchers need to prepare their audiences to receive their intellectual outputs, because no ownership or control can be established over the network in this nebulous, hybrid space.

Offering an alternative perspective on think tanks, Alexander Ruser provides a conceptual framework for analysing the distinct strategies of different types of think tanks in distinct institutional and ideological environments. By developing a framework that allows for differences at three levels, organisational (typologies), public interventions (role and

types of ideas) and institutional environments (knowledge regimes), the paper provides a novel way of understanding the impact of specific settings on the creation and dissemination of technical knowledge on political decision-making and public debate. This framework allows for comparison of think tank strategies across national contexts, as well as comparison of different outcomes of think tank activities. In conjunction with Tchilingirian's work on the interstitial space between fields that contains think tanks, this approach represents considerable progress in the ongoing controversy that exists around what a think tank is, what they do and how well they do it.

Diverging from analysis of a specific organisational type or particular types of experts or expertise, Marcos Gonzalez Hernando and Kate Williams are concerned with facilitating comparative analyses of intellectual interventions across sites of policy research. They explore the role of funding in shaping the topics, format and content of intellectual outputs across universities and think tanks. The paper offers a theoretical approach that accounts for the relationship between structural funding conditions and intellectual production in policy research contexts. The working model of the analytical phases of an intellectual intervention highlights the relationship between a policy issue, the substantial content of interventions, the format of interventions and the final 'position' that situates actors amongst the network of relationships they are embedded in. By focusing on intellectual outputs as artefacts, this provides a novel way of understanding the link between structural features and the type of intellectual interventions they facilitate or thwart for a range of institutions that produce policy knowledge. In this view, different analytical levels of intellectual interventions can be integrated and are conceived as both cause and effect of institutional dynamics.

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