



A Window onto Capitol Hill: Cunning Conservatism and Shadow Politics

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ABSTRACT

In times of political urgency, we should look carefully at the influencers behind political ideas. The “battle for ideas” is increasingly played out among backstage political actors, such as think tanks and policy professionals, who aim to influence the perception of social and political problems. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the United States, the article aims to shed light on how one of the major think tanks in the US, the Heritage Foundation, works to advocate and amplify the political positions taken by the conservatives in government. These are woven together by partly shared political visions and through the “economy of connections” made up by a web of personal and professional links. It is argued that understanding the modus operandi of policy professionals in think tanks is key to understanding how contemporary political influence works to promote contemporary versions of “cunning conservatism”.

Keywords: Think tanks, conservatism, networks, economy of connections, power

Introduction: Hopes and Battles for a New Era

With the new Presidential administration of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris sworn in, hopes have been set high in the United States (US). Although pundits warn against expecting miracles from the new President, there are hopes, not least from the democratic wing, that Biden will seek to restore a rules-based international order, which has been badly shaken by his predecessor Donald Trump; that he will work to bring the US back into the international community’s pursuit of peace and security, pushing development goals, and fighting climate change. From the conservative side, challenges ahead are perceived differently, including pushing back against an agenda of socialist policies and job-crushing laws and regulations, protecting “fundamental American rights”, such as limited federal interference, the right to life, and the right to bear arms. The battle for what constitutes “American values” and what restoring unity, tolerance, and respect for democratic procedures would imply is thus highly conflictual and played out in diverse social and political arenas.

In this battle, not just politicians and policy makers, but also journalists, pundits, and the general public, play a role. As new political ideas and policies are beginning to be articulated, and old ones scrutinised and challenged, we should stop and think about the influencers and architects behind some of these; who they are, what platform they operate from, and what are the ideologies and funding sources that propel them. We should look critically at the oracles and architects of ideas in times of political urgency. To a large extent, the “battle for ideas” is played out among the backstage political actors wanting to influence the perception of social and political problems, of financial priorities, and urgent domestic as

well as international policy. Think tanks, lobby firms, and other such organisations, and the “policy professionals” who work there are vital here (Garsten, Rothstein and Svallfors 2015). Conservative think tanks and other policy-focused nonprofit organisations have long been a fixture on Washington’s political scene.¹ They are essential in shaping political discourse and are the drivers behind the crafting of policy agendas. For instance, the Trump White House had adopted many of their proposals. In January 2018, the Heritage Foundation claimed that the administration had enacted nearly two-thirds of its policy recommendations till that date (https://projects.propublica.org/trump-town/organization_categories/think-tanks?page=1).

My research trajectory over the past ten years in the field of think tanks, has given me insights into how nestled and competitive the political landscape is; how much of it that is hidden from view, shadowed by curtains of formality, protocol, and diplomacy; and how imbricated it is with social relations and connections of trust.² My aim here is to shed light on how one of the major think tanks in the US, the Heritage Foundation, works to advocate and amplify the political positions taken by the conservatives in government; how it works to polish and brush up conservative policy; and how it does so by making use of social network and friendship ties in an “economy of connections”. With Michael Billig’s (1995) notion of “banal nationalism” – the routine and often unnoticed ways that established nation-states reproduce from day to day – we might analogously think of “banal conservatism” as the habitual everyday practices of reproducing a conservative political position. This is done in seemingly mundane and guileless ways, by way of discourse and practice, the choice of topics and the display of symbols, that serve to direct attention and fashion perspectives. Furthermore, in the context of this particular case, it does so whilst polishing political positions that are often divisive and exclusionary, and that lately have amplified the brute politics of the Trump administration. Also, banal conservatism sheds engagement with a number of questions vital for democracy, such as violent racism, the unequal access to basic welfare provisions, and the violation of human rights standards in migration, thus producing political absences. However, we would need to take this even further, because the overall intellectual agenda informing the agendas of conservative think tanks are anything but banal. Such ideas are more cunning than banal, since together they make up a long-term conservative political agenda. Moreover, they are not to be mistaken for recent. They are part of a lineage of ideas that stretches back to the birth and formation

¹ For almost a hundred years now, Washington D.C. has been the center of gravity in the “market for ideas” made up by think tanks, within the United States, as well as worldwide. According to a survey by the University of Pennsylvania (McGann 2021), there are just over 2,000 think tanks in the United States, the number of think tanks having more than doubled since 1980. D.C. itself is home to about eight per cent of these. The top ten US think tanks in the survey all have offices in Washington D.C. With D.C. being the center of the think tank universe, the 1700 block of Massachusetts Avenue, just off Dupont Circle, is at the heart of this universe. Whilst a common divide amongst think tanks is along partisan lines; this is often talked about in terms of “conservative” and “progressive”. On the conservative, or right, are organisations such as the Heritage Foundation, which works primarily “to formulate and promote public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense” (<https://www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission>). On the progressive, or the left, side are organisations such as The Progressive Policy Institute. Their mission is “to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock” (<https://www.progressivepolicy.org/>). There are also a number of “nonpartisan” think tanks, such as the Center for American Progress, who present themselves on the website as “an independent nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action” (<https://americanprogress.org/>).

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of neoliberalism in the 1920s, and that manifests itself in the more recent interlinkages of conservative, right-wing political movements with business, lobby firms, political action committees, and think tanks, skillfully described by Slobodian (2018). Thus, this type of conservatism is more of a coherent intellectual project – one that is woven together by at least partly shared political visions and a web of personal and professional links. Hence, we may instead conceive of this movement as “cunning conservatism”.³

Let me first discuss the beginning of my fieldwork in Washington D.C. with think-tank leaders overlooking Capitol Hill, the center of political gravity, and the symbol of power in the US.

Facing the Hill, Washington D.C., May 2011

As I enter the grandiose building of the Heritage Foundation, I am sweating from the brisk walk on the melting asphalt in the cityscape of central Washington D.C. As anyone having spent time in D.C. in the springtime knows, the weather can get very hot and humid at this time of the year. To match the weather, I am wearing a light blue cotton summer dress, short to the knees, and a pair of comfortably worn leather sandals, ignoring the otherwise customary, classic, and formal dress code of the social world of D.C. policy wonks.

The reception area of the think tank bears all the insignia of seriosity; massive, dark wooden panels, tall windows decorated with heavy soft curtains, and 19th century-style brown leather armchairs and coffee tables. Recent publications by the think-tank experts are discretely yet visibly spread out in the room, the topical titles adding a sense of contemporaneity and urgency to the solemnity of the space.

At the reception desk, I am told to wait a few minutes, since the person I am to meet, the President of the think tank, is still busy in a meeting. Relieved by this slight delay, I take the chance to refresh myself from the brisk and sweaty walk, in the ladies' room. Back in the reception area, I spot a neatly dressed man well over retirement age in suit and tie standing next to the reception, chatting with the groomed, yet timeworn reception lady. I approach the man with assertive steps, and greet him smilingly, thinking this must be the President. A sudden outburst of laughter fills the room, and chuckling, the reception lady explains that the neat man is in fact not the President, but the janitor. The President will be ready for me in a minute. “Damned”, I say to myself, working my hardest to regain composure and face. Well, ethnography is supposed to be about learning, and acting the child, right?

I had been referred to the President and founding father of the Heritage Foundation, Edwin Feulner, by a chain of referrals, starting out with a fellow anthropologist, who for a long period had been working as a leadership consultant to political and business leaders in the D.C. area. Having spent a month in D.C. trying to approach think tanks in every possible way I could think of, without much success, I had realised that the policy world of D.C. was one made up of an “economy of connections” (Garsten 2013), an economy in which friendships, family connections, connections made up of social club memberships, alumni associations, church affiliations, or other types of connections, were key resources. I had eventually gained a few entry points by ways of personal referrals from people I was acquainted with, and who were somehow involved in the policy networks of D.C. My fellow anthropologist had referred me to a leading conservative thinker and author of policy books,

³ On this point, moving beyond the “banal” and recognising the longer trajectory of conservative ideas, I am grateful to my reviewers for constructive comments.

deeply imbricated in the conservative think-tank world, who in turn had given me the mandate to use his name to get in touch with the President of the Heritage Foundation and one of their key experts. I was now to meet with the President himself, Ed Feulner, as well as one of his most senior associates, Lee Edwards, a distinguished Heritage Fellow in Conservative Thought.

A sense of gravity falls on the reception area once more, and after a few more minutes, another friendly-looking elderly man in an impeccable grey suit and tie approaches me. This time, it is indeed Mr. Edwards that I get to shake hands with. He takes me upstairs by the lift, all the way up to the top floor, where I am shown into the spacious office of Mr. Feulner.

“Welcome”, Mr. Feulner exclaims, with a warm professional tone of voice. “Please have a seat”. Mr. Edwards then brings three lightweight chairs from different places in the room, positions them in a triangle in the middle of the large room, on an oriental carpet, and we are invited to take our seats. “What”, I wonder silently, “may be the purpose of this seating arrangement?” It appears as though we are about to enter into an interrogation, without being clear on who is to interrogate whom. There is no rush. The grandfather clock fills the room with its ticking sound, and the buzz of the city outside of the window is hardly audible. The lavish office appears like a bubble, from a different time and space, far removed from the hectic pace of the capitol cityscape. I think to myself that this is a particular version of the veritable think “tank”; as a container of thoughts.

As my eyes scan the office, I register a massive wooden work desk, heavy bookshelves with colorful hardcover book spines, framed photos of what I assume to be the President’s family, and of himself, posing with insignia. The office connotes both a sense of personality and even intimacy, I note, as well as a sense of distinction and professionalism. Stars and Stripes has its place on a chest of drawers. There is a comfortable couch in front of one of the many tall windows that overlook The Mall and Capitol Hill. “From here”, Mr. Feulner exclaims, “we have perfect vision of what goes on up on the Hill”. Indeed, the Dome is close enough to fill up one of the windows almost entirely, with the Statue of Liberty on top. If I was to look more carefully, I could almost catch a glimpse of the Apotheosis fresco in the eye of the Capitol Building’s Dome, depicting George Washington rising to the heavens in glory, flanked by female figures representing Liberty and Victory/Fame and surrounded by six groups of figures, lining the perimeter of the canopy: War, Science, Marine, Commerce, Mechanics, Agriculture. There was the symbol, the glorification, of American ideals and values.

I start the conversation by thanking them for taking the time to see me, and explaining the purpose of my visit and the brief rationale of my research project. As I speak, I am increasingly made aware of the improper attire I am wearing. In these environs, a simple cotton dress and sandals are plain amiss. Nothing less than formal skirt and jacket suit and scarf would have been appropriate here. The policy world of D.C., as I had started to understand it, was clearly a male-dominated one, in terms of numbers as well as with respect to dress code, mannerisms, and social networks. Part of the “ease of interactional privilege” (Khan 2011) that was associated with this social world, comprises knowing what the appropriate business attire consists of. This, I should have anticipated, and I blame myself. After all, it is not the first time I am interviewing top organisational leaders under formal, or formatted, circumstances.

To some degree, Mr. Feulner appears to be interested and flattered by the attention shown himself and his organisation. “Over the years, we have always strived to keep a close relation to Congress”, he proudly declares, pointing out the window towards the Dome, “and we have a good track record of gaining the attention of the Administration for our

ideas and policy proposals”. He then starts narrating the history of the think tank, and of its role in contemporary US-politics and policymaking. As Feulner recalls, it was during a discussion with fellow congressional aide Paul Weyrich, that the idea for creating the Heritage Foundation surfaced. Being a congressional aide to Republican Philip Crane in the early 1970s, he had come to realise the need for timely, useable policy analysis that people working on the Hill could use, and that would be usable *before* the debate and the vote. He talks vividly about the basic set of values that form the baseline of the positions taken by the think tank, and why is it that they embrace them. “Since its start in 1974, the mission of the Heritage Foundation has been to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense. We have grown with it”, he tells me.

I later realised the extent to which Feulner was known and respected in the Washington D.C. policymaking community, and more specifically how closely associated he was with calibrating the conservative movement. The Heritage Foundation prides itself of being the most successful think tank in terms of impact on public policy, and to have led the way for reforms in every policy area – from taxes and regulation to crime and national defense. At this point in time (May 2011), the top priority on the political agenda, and hence on the agenda of the think tank, was the massive federal budget deficit. Other top political concerns were the US-China contest for supremacy on global markets, and the question of “American exceptionalism”. Mr Feulner declares it to be the role of the Heritage Foundation to specialise in quick-response public policy research and marketing. “In this process, defining the idea is not enough”, he emphasises, “you have to ensure the idea reaches the right target audience. You want the product to reflect what our institution believes, and to get attention. You need timely, effective delivery into the system. You need to factor in receptivity at the other end. How will they receive our goods? You want to be sufficiently provocative for people to want to read it”.

A couple of minutes later into our conversation, he steps out of the thought-world of the tank, as it were, underlines the value of understanding the reality outside of Congress. “We live half our lives in the world of policy. We need to have our feet on the ground, to understand reality outside of the Capital Beltway. We have some high-level thinkers, in terms of ideas, in our organisation. But they have their feet grounded in reality. They see the impact of ideas. We are the prototypical example of a think-and-do-tank”.

By referring the world outside Capital Beltway he invokes the symbolic meaning of the expression. “Inside the Beltway” is essentially an American idiom used to characterise matters that are, or seem to be, important primarily to officials of the U.S. federal government, to its contractors and lobbyists, and to the corporate media who cover them – as opposed to the interests and priorities of the general US population. In crude terms, populists on both sides of the political spectrum share an imagined geography of the US. based on the Capital Beltway, the highway that loops around Washington, D.C. Everything “outside the Beltway” is perceived to be the genuine America, while everything “inside the Beltway” is viewed with suspicion as part of the political establishment. Mr. Feulner thus links to the general population, implying that the Heritage Foundation may perceive and translate the ideas and priorities of the general population to the political establishment. The organisation thus positions itself as a transmitter, or perhaps an oracle, of the general population, purporting to grasp what goes on at the ground level, as it were. The notion of a “think-and-do tank”

is one commonly used by think tanks aiming to achieve impact and measurable results based on their research and knowledge-seeking activities. It is often associated with a more pragmatist and actionable approach, as well as a more partisan position than think tanks with a more academic and nonpartisan bent.

Mr. Feulner continues to talk passionately about the values that provide the base for what they do. He tells me about the book he recently co-authored, *Getting America Right: The True Conservative Values America Needs Today* (Feulner and Wilson 2007). In essence, he recounts, the message of the book is that what will rescue America now are the things that have always made the nation great: free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, a strong national defense, and the rule of law. “American values are central to anything we do”, he continues. “We believe in traditional family values, in social order, and in individual responsibility. Traditional values impact everything we talk about, our country, our future. We have seen entities rise and fall, and disappear. We plan on being around for a long time”. As he speaks, he swings his arm comfortably in the direction of the Stars and Stripes. His words come across with an unmistakable degree of certitude and conviction. Mr. Edwards nods silently in agreement.

I leave the Heritage Foundation, the two gentlemen, and the premises with a creeping feeling of having learnt little more than the glossy, official PR image of the organisation. Yet, besides the words exchanged and the documents I got to carry with me, I leave the premises of the Heritage Foundation with the view of the Capitol Dome imprinted on my mind. Whatever activities the foundation is involved in, they are all motivated by the aspiration to get the attention of the people on the Hill. The continuous and relentless observation of ongoing political discussions; the ceaseless efforts to produce topical knowledge; and the endeavour to put this into the hands of decision makers before the actual decision, are all geared to provide members of Congress and the ruling political administration with actionable insights for decision making. Capitol Hill, the meeting place of the United States Congress and the seat of the legislative branch of the US government, appears not only as a massive and tangible manifestation of political power, but also as a symbol of impact and influence for those who operate around it. “Making one’s voice heard” among members of Congress means that one has managed to garner enough attraction and credibility for the work of the organisation to merit being heard at the highest level of political authority. During the early phases of my fieldwork in D.C. this had already become clear to me, as I had participated in seminars and other events organised by think tanks, during interviews, and by following media coverage. Whatever the ideological bent of the think tank that was articulated, or the particular version of “American values” that was propagated, the aim is always to get that view across to Congress. But nowhere was it stamped as clear as it was during my visit to the Heritage Foundation. At its premises, from within the office of its president, the omnipresent Capitol Hill also manifested itself through the window glass.

“Part gatekeeper, part brain trust and part boots on the ground”

At the root of all activities undertaken at the Heritage Foundation, we find what Ed Feulner calls “a long-term philosophy”, based on “American values”. This set of values is then flexibly attuned to the political administration and the currency of policy action. During an interview with Feulner’s co-author Doug Wilson a week earlier, I had been told that Heritage had built a strong liaison with the Reagan administration early on in its existence:

They started in the late 1970s. They saw that Reagan was going to probably become president, and when they realised he was – they were very entrepreneurial, with Ed Feulner and Phil Truluck and a handful of others – they took the initiative and went to all the conservative think tanks and began getting consensus on what America's priorities needed to be for Ronald Reagan's term in office, and they turned that into a book called *Mandate for America*. They got Ed Meese, who was, at that time, the chief policy advisor for Reagan. He and his cabinet as governor in California, so he'd come to D.C. Meese really liked what they put together, and, on the first day, Reagan had his cabinet meeting, Meese had gotten to Reagan, and Reagan read this *Mandate for America*, liked it, embraced it. He asked Meese to put a copy of that mandate in front of every cabinet member, at the first cabinet meeting, and said, "This is going to be our blueprint for what we want to change in America", and that it became. And so, Heritage, suddenly, was huge in its influence, and the policies, basically, that Reagan advanced had come from these consensus of the think tanks that had been aggregated by the Heritage Foundation. So, there you see the entrepreneurial quality. Heritage is an entrepreneurial think tank that picks key issues around conservative principles, but they do not allow for individual rock stars. They march as an organisation with an agreed-upon mandate, and everyone lines up.

The book, later published as *Mandate for Leadership*, was published by The Heritage Foundation (Heatherly, ed. 1981). In essence, it provides conservative solutions to issues ranging from free trade to Social Security reform to reducing federal spending. President Ronald Reagan, the organisation claims, used the book to develop many of his policies from the early 1980s and onwards. In fact, he used it so much it became a kind of handbook for the new administration.

The Heritage Foundation has in general had considerable influence over Republican politicians and has nurtured close relations to party representatives. For a long time, and with Feulner in charge, the foundation has maintained liaisons, courting House and Senate staff members to inform them about the costs and benefits of supporting or opposing proposed legislation.

Under the later leadership of Jim DeMint, former South Carolina Republican Senator who became Heritage Foundation president in 2013, the foundation turned away from being seen as an embodiment of the Republican party establishment, to become more of a political organisation feeding off the rising populism of the Tea Party movement. Following a period of turmoil, De Mint was discharged from his position in 2017, to be succeeded by Kay Coles James. James has deep ties to the Republican party's social conservative and evangelical Christian wing and served in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George Bush and George W. Bush. Under her leadership, the organisation has taken a more moderate position, generally supporting the Republican party, but also being criticised by donors to the foundation and by Trump supporters for wasting its opportunity to lead at a time when Republicans controlled the House, Senate, and White House (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/us/politics/heritage-foundation-kay-cole-james.html>).

During the presidential election of last year, the Heritage Foundation organised a series of events focused on the United States Constitution and what lies ahead. The general position of the organisation is that conservative solutions which have always been at the core of the organisation, will continue to be their long-term strategy. This involves a continued support for upholding the rights and freedoms of the individual, of family, and of local communities, as grounded in the Constitution. The basic "values" referred to may be seen as a form of "cultural celebrationism" (Hannerz 2019: 218), embracing and providing interpretation of what is perceived to be key elements of "being American". The strong connections to, and

support for, the Republican party manifested themselves clearly, as they intensified their social networking with party representatives and potential future members of the incoming political administration, and through events geared to a support for Republican politics.

The Heritage Foundation is known to have been one of the most influential forces shaping then President-elect Donald Trump's transition team, as stated in *Politico* (Glueck 2016): "Part gatekeeper, part brain trust and part boots on the ground, Heritage is both a major presence on the transition team itself and a crucial conduit between Trump's orbit and the once-skeptical conservative leaders who ultimately helped get him elected". The Heritage Foundation is perceived to have been essential to staffing the administration with people who reflect Trump's commitments across the board. Several people formerly compensated or employed by the organisation went to work at different state agencies. Heritage also played a significant role in the push for Amy Coney Barrett to be elected to the Supreme Court. Several commentaries on the Heritage website confirm their wide and strong support for her candidacy and for her conservative positions, not least with regards to her position on the First and Second Amendments (Freedom of Religion, Speech, Press, Assembly, and Petition; and the Right to Bear Arms, respectively) (<https://www.heritage.org/courts/commentary/the-importance-justice-amy-coney-barrett>; <https://www.heritage.org/courts/commentary/amy-coney-barrett-the-first-amendment>).

Thus, whilst it may be pushing it too far to say that the organisation works as a gatekeeper to the political administration; their role in the revolving door process, i.e., the movement of individuals from government positions to jobs with interest groups, think tanks, or lobbying firms, and vice versa, should not be underestimated. By way of connections, network constellations, and advocacy, Heritage has played a role in casting, and defending, the Republican administration. The political scene thus extends far beyond the direct actions of the state administration and the elected politicians and their administrative staff. Also influential are networks of influential individuals and organisations, such as The Heritage Foundation and their leadership.

A Political Amplifier

One of my early interlocutors at another most important think tank in Washington D.C., the Woodrow Wilson Institute, told me that "Credibility is key, you need to build up credibility to be let into the policy circles of D.C." Just like most think tanks, The Heritage Foundation claims to have in their orbit access to expertise and analytical prowess with which to build credibility. They claim to "provide timely, accurate research on key policy issues" (<https://www.heritage.org/about-heritage/mission>). This research is undertaken by inhouse "experts" and their staff, who work on chosen topics and agendas. The experts are key resources in the "battle of ideas", and may be seen as the brain trust of the organisation. According to Mr. Wilson, The Heritage Foundation has good data, "they get good statistics". Over the past few years, the policy areas in which the organisation has been engaged have to a large extent mirrored the priorities of the Trump Presidency. During the Trump era, The Heritage Foundation has been a fervent opponent of the Kyoto Protocol, and its online database of "policy experts" includes many climate change skeptics. A large number of the seminars and events hosted by the organisation during the Trump presidency have given space for a skeptical view on climate change and regulations. Also, statements on the organisation's website have supported Trump's response to COVID-19, arguing that contrary to critics'

views as too little, too late, “But Trump has imposed travel restrictions, convened a national response strategy, and demanded cooperation from both the public and private sectors. That’s substantially more than Washington, Jackson, or Wilson did in the hour of health crisis” (<https://www.heritage.org/public-health/commentary/jackson-and-wilson-had-nothing-trump-epidemic>, visited January 11, 2021). Overall, the Trump administration has been supported by way of the topics chosen for debate as well as the speakers and panel members invited to participate in the events.

As most other think tanks, The Heritage Foundation also organises events to which they invite speakers from the ruling political administration to air their views on topical issues, acting as a hosting arena for the sharing of ideas and for discussion. For example, in October 2020, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation President’s Club Meeting, under the title “Trump Administration Diplomacy: The Untold Story”. He started his speech with the following remarks:

Thank you all. Thank you. Well, good morning, everyone. So I’ve got a prepared speech, and then I got some thoughts (Laughter). And I’ll mix them this morning.

I want to thank Kay [the president of Heritage, author’s comment] and the entire leadership team at Heritage for having me here this morning. We were talking backstage about the gala tonight, and I reminded them that I’d been to the gala a number of times when I was a member of Congress. This is an important institution here in Washington, D.C., delivering on behalf of America, and I value it, and this administration values it, and I know so many leaders all across the United States Government value it as well.

And it’s also great to be here. Everybody remembers the Bob Dylan song, ‘Shelter from the Storm’. It’s good to be with you all. [Laughter, author’s comment] And I know there are a bunch of friends here, too, that – people that I’ve known an awfully long time who are here with us this morning, too. I want to thank you all for supporting this really important institution. Heritage has indeed schooled many generations of free market believers in free societies. I was a trustee on a think tank back in Kansas called the Kansas Public Policy Institute. We would read Heritage reports all the time to try to make sure we were getting it right, and trying to get it right for the state of Kansas in the same way you all here are doing that for Washington.

(<https://translations.state.gov/2019/10/22/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-heritage-foundation-presidents-club-meeting-trump-administration-diplomacy-the-untold-story/>, visited January 11, 2021).

Of interest here is the reference to Heritage as place to which one may turn for “getting it right”, and the recognition provided by the ruling political administration. The introductory remarks, as well as the talk in its entirety, echoed a sense of mutual understanding; of reciprocal support for the guiding conservative principles; as well as for “Trump diplomacy” at the international level.

Think tanks generally aim to provide an arena for discussions across sectors of society, with the general aim to increase involvement in, and influence on, policy-related topics (see for e.g. Abelson 2006; McGann 2007; Medvetz 2012a, 2012b; Rich 2004; Smith 1991; Stone 1996, 2001; Weidenbaum 20008). Whilst some of them strive to strike a balance between ideological positions, or to be non-partisan, others more clearly push for a particular ideological position and support a specific political view. Overall, the Heritage Foundation stands behind

and supports a conservative position in general, and more specifically the Republican party.

During the Trump era, it has acted as a political amplifier of the kind of politics pushed by the Trump administration. Following the recent storming of the Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 however, the President of the Heritage Foundation explicitly condemned the actions of the organised mob that violently forced their way into the building, shattering windows and destroying furniture, ravaging offices and swarming the House chamber (<https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/commentary/amid-chaos-our-resilient-republic-endures>, visited January 12, 2021). However, Trump's role in creating the political climate in which "alternative facts", his consistent lies about the election being rigged, encouraging and inciting violence, and an attempted coup, were not mentioned.

Choosing to highlight key policy areas pushed by Trump's administration, also means that the foundation has avoided other topical policy areas of importance. Crucial absences, or voids, have been created by staying clear of critical societal discussions, for e.g. racial discrimination, migration, basic welfare provisions, and other significant policy areas. But, as Apthorpe (1997) reminds us, "... these gaps are not voids. They are crowded spaces already filled with moral values and preconceptions" (Shore and Wright 1997: 16). By not addressing critical and contested events, and by not engaging in critical social questions, Heritage has taken the role as a political amplifier of Republican politics.

Polished Renderings

Not only does The Heritage Foundation offer a place for "getting things right", as Pompeo enunciated it, providing evidence and explaining positions and actions taken by the Republican Party and Trump himself; over the past few years, Heritage has hosted several events focused more avidly on polishing and glazing the actions of Trump. The blunt, often racist, and anti-democratic speech acts and actions of Trump have been followed by the hosting of events that serve to embellish and legitimise them. For example, Heritage hosted a virtual event organised on November 3, 2020, under the title "Is the President Trumping Constitutional Norms?" The introductory passage read:

Since taking office, President Trump has been derided by the mainstream media and his critics as running roughshod over constitutional norms, fueling the conviction of liberals and some moderate conservatives that the 45th President poses an ongoing threat to the Constitution. In *Defender in Chief*, constitutional scholar John Yoo argues that Trump's adversaries have things exactly backwards. Far from considering Trump an inherent danger to our nation's founding principles, Yoo contends that the Framers would have seen Trump as restoring their vision of presidential power. It is instead, the liberal opponents who would overthrow existing constitutional norms to unseat Trump, thereby inflicting permanent damage on the presidency.

Join us for a lively and timely discussion on presidential power and constitutional norms in the Trump era, with the book's author, John Yoo, and well-known legal scholar David Rivkin.

The Heritage Foundation's extensive ties to the Republican party have led scholars to refer to it as "the de facto research arm of the GOP" (Callahan 1999), or "an adjunct" to the party (Medvetz 2012b). Its Republican ties notwithstanding, it is also worth noting that Heritage walks a thin line between keeping a healthy distance from the party in order to remain a standard bearer of American conservatism, and to pay tribute to their Republican

clients and stakeholders (cf. Medvetz 2012b). In many instances though, it clearly appears that Heritage has rather taken the role of translating party policies into euphemisms, by embellishing or polishing them.

Friends and Trusted Parties

Power has always been heavily reliant on personal associations, interlocking networks and intimate linkages. Politicians, policy makers, and corporate leaders carefully nurture relationships with people they judge to be strategically positioned, in a field of diffused and nomadic power (cf. Wedel 2009; Svallfors 2020). Early on, I learnt that the policy world of Washington D.C. is made up of social ties of varying intensity and depth. Figuring out the network, finding my way into it and experimenting with new ways of engaging with people, was not only a methodological enterprise; it provided some insights into the role of friendship and social ties in the seemingly impersonal and bureaucratic world of think tanks.

Elsewhere, I have stated that the dense network of “policy professionals” – think-tank experts, policy makers, politicians, multilateral experts, and corporate leaders – works like “an economy of connections”, in which connections, referrals, and references, become valuable capital in a competitive and politicised form of exchange (Garsten 2013, see also Steege 2007). It constitutes an “economy”, in the sense that social connections and referrals are provided as gifts between trusted parties. The connection may provide access to yet other valuable resources, like funding, information, media attention, or a job opportunity, which may, in the long run, translate into financial resources and political impact. Introductions and referrals to high-ranking, influential people are given as gifts, in the sense that they are tokens of a relationship that is seen as valuable enough to invest in and in which there may be an anticipation of reciprocity. The recipient of the gift is, in return, expected to recognise the value in the act of the giver, to provide the giver with information about the unfolding and implication of the contact and, most importantly, to be ready to assist with a useful connection in the future. Ideally, recurrent giving serves to circulate and redistribute valuables, in the form of connections, within the community of policy professionals, contributing, over time, to the development of a dense network of connections around specific policy areas.

The reference to a “bunch of friends” in the quote above is not a singular event. In introductions to panels and other events, there is often a reference to “friends”, signifying that the relation goes back in time and that it is a trusted one. The open confirmation of relations and friendships also inform listeners that there is a network out there, formed around common perspectives, job experiences, and a degree of reciprocity.

This economy of connections is intertwined with the organisational structures of society, erecting “pillars of social capital” (Bourdieu 1986) that attach to key positions in organisational hierarchies. The social capital that derives from resources linked to a durable network of relationships of mutual recognition provides the members with credentials which, in Bourdieu’s (1986: 51) words, “entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word”. The networks of connections within and among organisations are thus the product of relational investment strategies aimed at establishing or maintaining social connections that can be used in the short- or long term and that imply durable obligations (Bourdieu 1986: 52).

Establishing close ties to Capitol Hill, to various government agencies and departments, and to the media, contribute to creating the kind of infrastructure of relations which think-tank leaders and experts need, to ensure that their voices are heard in “the battle for ideas”.

Unlike institutional, formal relations, these informal ties depend for their functioning on continuous nurturing and creation of trust. And importantly, as Derrida (1992) reminds us, gifts have an ambivalent dimension, since they may be both beneficial and poisonous at the same time. The “good” of the gift can easily be reversed, putting the donor in debt. This is also why too close relations and associations between politicians and think tanks leaders may become counter-productive.

Concluding Notes: Cunning Conservatism and Shadow Politics

Think tanks straddle the porous line of being formally excluded from political influence yet are mandated to educate, inform, and advocate. They are, in a sense, boundary-spanning organisations, deriving their influence from their strategic locations within and among organisations (Medvetz 2012b). They need to be inventive and entrepreneurial in order to make an imprint on political decision-makers and to achieve impact. The constant references to the Hill; the provision of policy briefs to political insiders; the striving to be invited to testify before Congress in the House or Senate; and the wish to influence the further trajectory of a bill to a potential legal action, are all part and parcel of the fight to cross the invisible boundary and to achieve impact.

Think tanks often provide the political administration with a platform from which they may spread their perspectives and engage with other experts, with academics, and with media. By way of seminars and panel debates, they also work to interpret, debate, and provide legitimisation for a particular political standpoint. They generally spend considerable resources on public relations and take pains to hire skilled professionals to work on the timely and topical production of a variety of documents: reports, press releases, policy briefs, position papers, annual reports, and the like (cf. Riles 2006).⁴ Depending on the ideological bent, they may also work as a political amplifier to the ruling administration, reinforcing their policies and standpoints; and, they may serve to polish and euphemise contested political positions, thereby glossing over problematic stances. By their choice of topics, their choices of invitees, their liaisons with politicians, and their choices of media outlets, they not only contribute to the broadening of knowledge and development of insights into certain political issues, but also engage in creating and maintaining critical absences. Urgent societal problems may in this way be left unattended to.

In one way or the other, and to varying degrees, every nation-state maintains a distinction between the people who are authorised to formally participate in the political process, and those who are not. As Brubaker (2010) reminds us, all polities create barriers to membership. The Heritage Foundation, like many other think tanks in the US, functions in some instances as gatekeeper, funneling connections between the political administration, corporations, media houses, and the citizenry. They also indirectly work to influence who moves into the political powerhouses, and who does not.

My experiences with think tanks also led me to reflect on the small and largely unnoticed details in the ways that ideological positions are routinely reproduced. The insignias of power may differ between organisations, as do the modes of social interaction, the mannerisms, and

⁴ In fact, the bulk of my fieldwork in Washington D.C. was undertaken in the public relations department of a progressive think tank. From this vantage point, I got to see the production of and diffusion of information of various kinds, from podcasts, to policy briefs and hardcover books, and the daily negotiations around priority, format, and timing.

the dress codes. In one way or other, the polished habitats of think-tank policy professionals also convey a sense of community for insiders, and a sense of distance and barrier to those who are not members of these networks. The interactional ease of privilege (Khan 2011) that insiders experience and express, is matched by the awkwardness and discomfort experienced by the outsiders. An invisible boundary is clear in its very absence. We may think of The Heritage Foundation as a place where “cunning conservatism”, far from being just “banal”, is being reproduced. By way of constant references to “American values”, the Constitution, free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and a strong national defense, their role in the conservative movement is emphasised. The unremarkable little words that flag conservative values; the casual reference to insiders and outsiders, friends and antagonists; the routine framing and templating of events; and the presence of material objects of value; all signal the inclusivist and exclusivist visions of the nation, and what “being American” should entail. Whilst Billig’s work has encouraged scholars to expand the scope of the notion of banal nationalism and push it into new terrains, giving rise to a wide range of conceptual innovations (Koch and Passi 2016), there is much more to be said for the apparently trivial, indeed the more cunning and guileful, in the making of policy and striving for power.

Is it fair to say think tanks like The Heritage Foundation play a role in cultivating the kind of political climate that we experience today, and that its darker side has manifested itself in the form of the riots and insurgencies we have just witnessed? Could they in some sense be seen as accountable for the political unrest and undemocratic tendencies that are visible today? Well, on the surface, it may seem like there would be a mammoth distance between the civilised, groomed, and scripted environs and mannerisms of think tanks like The Heritage Foundation, and the crude, unpolished violence of the rioters. I doubt that any of the leaders I met would in any way endorse the actions of the crowd that stormed the Capitol. Nevertheless, to the extent that The Heritage Foundation claims to have had an impact on Trump’s transition into power, and on influencing several of the policies that have been implemented under the Trump administration, they cannot escape the doubts cast. The economy of connections that has been established between the think tank and the Trump administration has become poisonous. The problem with think-tank organisations is that they are not set up for taking responsibility for the impact they may have. They are not designed to be accountable; instead they are purportedly meant only to educate, inform, and advocate. Their responsibility ends right there, with the ideas and propositions they are able to push. The trouble begins when we realise that the US political system is essentially designed to be dependent on organisations like think tanks and lobby firms, that “help government think”, as it were (cf. Pautz 2020).

Seen in a broader context, the conservative think tank as a political force, has grown steadily since the 1970s. As pointed out by Stahl (2016), the conservative think tank has been able to advance as a site of political and cultural power, and to engage in policy-making and ideological promotion on a wide scale, both inside and outside the state. In the long run, the liaison between conservative think tanks and the political administration, may undermine established democratic institutions and procedures, as aptly demonstrated by MacLean (2017) in her study of right-wing political power in the US. Yet, despite recent studies examining conservative and right-wing political movements in the US, little attention has been paid to the study of think tanks as some of the central institutions of conservative political thinking.

For ethnography, the nested character of contemporary political power implies that

our anthropological training in tracing connections, networks, friendships, kinship, and organisational links comes in very handy. Our methodological toolkit should be well equipped to trace how “discreet power” operates (Garsten and Sörbom 2018); the configurations of power that fly under the radar; and how the exclusionary circles of influence are made up. With Trouillot (2001), we should think of the state, and other influential organisations, as a multiplicity of fields, boundaries, and institutions. Ethnographic research then becomes the study of ongoing events and processes that reflect the dynamics of transnational power relations and the circulation and concentration of economic power. Understanding the modus operandi of policy professionals in think tanks is key to understanding how contemporary political influence and democratic accountability function, and brings to the fore fundamental questions about the current state and future of democracy.

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