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Article

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Abstract

Think tanks, defined as organizations that produce policy research for political purposes (McGann, 2007; Medvetz, 2008), are an increasingly ubiquitous type of policy actor world-wide. In Sweden, the last 20 years' sharp increase in think tank numbers (Åberg, Einarsson, & Reuter, 2019) has coincided with the decline of the traditional Swedish corporatist model based on the intimate involvement of the so-called 'popular movements' in policy-making (Lundberg, 2014; Micheletti, 1995). Contrary to the large, mass-membership based and democratically organized movement organizations, think tanks are small, professionalized, expert-based, and seldom represent any larger membership base. Their increasingly important role as the ideological greenhouses in Swedish civil society might, therefore, be interpreted as an indication of an increasingly elitist and professionalized character of the latter. But what is a think tank? The article explores how a shared understanding of what constitutes a think tank is constructed by think-tankers themselves. In the study, interviewed think tank executives and top-level staff reflect upon their own organizations' missions and place in the Swedish policy system.

Issue

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the increasing proliferation of independent organizations trading in policy advice has attracted growing attention in the social sciences. Being originally an Anglo-Saxon (and particularly U.S. American) phenomenon, policy institutes or 'think tanks' are today ubiquitous in most countries, as well as at the global level, across the whole spectrum of policy fields (Rich, 2004; Stone, 1997). While they are often analysed primarily as actors in policy systems, these organizations are also part of civil society. This is due not only to their legal form which often is that of associations or foundations, but above all to the fact that think tanks work by diffusing ideas, and their operations usually aim at influencing societal development in some form. As such, think tanks fit well into a neo-Gramscian view of civil society which highlights this sphere's normative, ideational, and discursive dimensions (e.g., Reuter, Wijkström, & Meyer, 2015; Wijkström & Reuter, 2015). Generation and dissemination of, as well as mobilization around, ideas and ideologies, which is at the centre of what think tanks do, is, according to this perspective, a trademark of civil society actors.

Think tanks are, however, a particular type of civil society organization: They lack individual membership, are often established and funded by other actors in civil society, and their raison d'être and legitimacy as policy actors are based on expertise rather than on being anchored in particular segments of the broader society. In contrast to many types of grassroots oriented organizations traditionally associated with civil society, think tanks build their claim to influence not on interest representation or community but on a carefully negotiated balance between expertise and opinion, or between knowledge and ideology. As highly professionalized organizations, often run and staffed by individuals with high academic credentials, think tanks are therefore often conceptualized in the extant literature as a distinctly elitist type of political and policy actor (e.g., Fischer, 1991; Savage, 2016; Smith, 1991; Stone, 2001).

What is a think tank, though? The literature notes frequently that defining these organizations is a notoriously difficult task, the think tank concept being slippery, distinctly empirical, and hard to pinpoint analytically. Moreover, the term 'think tank' is often used by organizations to strategically position themselves at the crossroads of different institutional fields (Hauck, 2017; Medvetz, 2012), but also to put into question the legitimacy of rival organizations. What a think tank is, is in many cases a matter of what suits the actors involved. It is therefore relevant to examine how these organizations themselves discursively construct the 'think tank' as a type of civil society and policy actor. And, as the institutional context in which think tanks operate is crucial for the character of the niche they occupy in civil society and in the policy system (Åberg, Einarsson, & Reuter, 2019; Kelstrup, 2016), it is also relevant to highlight the importance of such context for the way in which these organizations define themselves.

This article aims to explore how think tanks, or rather 'think-tankers' (the people involved in the organizations in different capacities) themselves construct an idea of what a think tank is and how its purpose(s) should be understood in relation to the wider institutional environment. While this question has been previously addressed with a focus on the U.S. American setting (Medvetz, 2010), our interest lies in the self-understanding of think tanks in contexts where this type of civil society and policy actor is relatively new, and where think tank(er)s thus cannot count on their organizations' purpose and place in society being immediately obvious to the outside observer. What components does the narrative about being a think tank consist of in such a setting? how do these components relate to the cultural and historical traits of the institutional environment? and how do they reflect the think tank as an institutional 'newcomer' in this particular setting?

Our discussion is based on a qualitative, interview-based study of four Swedish think tanks and of the ways in which their directors, staff and board members understand and portray the nature and roles of their or-

ganizations. Swedish civil society has during the 20th century been dominated by broad, membership-based and democratically structured organizations with strong grassroots orientation, and with a strong position in the corporatist Swedish policy system—i.e., so-called popular movements (*folkrörelser*). Think tanks are a relatively new phenomenon in this context, and it is a type of actor still very much in search of its proper place in Swedish civil society and the Swedish policy arena (Åberg et al., 2019). This provides us with a unique opportunity to explore think tanks' self-image 'in the making,' while it is still being negotiated. As these organizations in many respects clearly diverge from traditional forms of Swedish civil society organizing, we are also interested in the extent to which their differentiation from other, more traditional grassroots oriented types of actor, is a part of their self-understanding.

Inspired by Medvetz (2012), we focus less on what a 'real' think tank is, and more on how these organizations, by labelling themselves think tanks and ascribing to themselves certain characteristics, collectively contribute to constructing the ideal-typical think tank. The collective dimension is important here, as we want to explore the extent to which think tanks in a particular national institutional setting develop a shared understanding (cf. Fligstein & McAdam, 2012) of their own nature and purpose.

2. Think Tanks in Civil Society and in the Policy System

While the sphere of civil society is often associated with grassroots empowerment and conceptualized as a space for ordinary citizens to collectively strive to transform society, the emergence of the think tank as an increasingly visible actor in this space has often been interpreted as a sign of an elitist turn in civil society and policy-making (e.g., Fischer, 1991; Savage, 2016; Smith, 1991; Stone, 2001). One of the few things that the extant think tank literature appears to agree on is the elite-oriented character of these organizations. There are, at the same time, different interpretations of how this elitism should be understood. In the classical debate between elitist and pluralist perspectives on U.S. American politics, think tanks have often been portrayed by elite theorists as tools for advancing the interests of an increasingly global corporate-political elite (e.g., Domhoff, 2009, 2010; Dye, 2001; Peschek, 1987) and as vehicles for the neo-liberal ideas that are seen as supporting those interests.

Most think tank scholars, however, conceptualize the exclusive—or exclusionary—character of these organizations in wider, more general terms. Rather than the representation of particular class's interests, think tank elitism is linked here to their technocratic outlook, the exclusivity of their 'products,' and their claims to expertise and intimate knowledge of public policy processes. In this understanding, think tank professionals are seen as part of a new rising political class consisting of managerial and policy experts or the 'technically trained knowl-

edge elites' (Fischer, 1991). Stone (2001) notes, for example, that think tanks cater to those 'politically and economically literate,' are populated by highly educated individuals from privileged backgrounds, and that their frequent interactions with political and administrative decision-makers allow them to acquire considerable influence (Stone, 2001). She draws attention to access and participation in think tanks not normally being open to the general public and sees their expert status as a form of exclusiveness.

In his seminal work on think tanks from 2012, Medvetz divides society into 1) the political and bureaucratic field, which includes actors such as state agencies, social movements, and political parties; 2) the field of cultural production, which includes universities but also for instance policy journals; 3) the media field, including for instance newspapers and magazines; and 4) the economic field, which in Medvetz's model contains corporations as well as labour unions and trade associations (Medvetz, 2012). It should be noted that the four fields mentioned overlap each other and the space of think tanks is chiselled out in the middle of all this. Savage (2016) argues that the interstitial position of think tanks noted by Medvetz in itself contributes to their elite character. Savage sees the intersections of the four spheres where think tanks reside as containing society's core institutions, which themselves are dominated by highly influential, 'elite' actors. Think tanks' links to these spheres give them, in his view, a unique ability to influence the formation of public opinion, the construction of politics, and the development of policy.

The question of the extent to which the think tank should be regarded as being, in some sense, an elite type of actor, depends of course to a considerable extent on how we define this organization in the first place. As indicated in the introduction, the simple question of 'what is a think tank' generates multiple, often vague, and even contradictory answers. Since the term itself is empirical rather than analytical, its more precise meaning appears to be very context-bound (Åberg et al., 2019; Kelstrup, 2016). What is understood as a think tank in a certain institutional context; which organizations call themselves (or are referred to as) think tanks in that context; and which of these organizations perform the tasks and roles usually ascribed to think tanks, may, therefore, be three very different things.

The issue of defining think tanks is further complicated by the fact that, as Medvetz (2012) notes, the think tank label has over time become a rhetorical tool of its own, used for strategic purposes by actors wishing to position themselves in the relevant social structure. As the term 'think tank' invokes images of scientific objectivity and rigour (Pautz, 2007), to be awarded this label is, for some organizations and in some contexts, "to rise above mere interest-group struggles and claim membership in the ranks of experts" (Medvetz, 2012, p. 34). For others, and in other contexts, it may, on the other hand, mean being degraded from a 'respectable' aca-

demic research institute to a mere ideological hothouse. Medvetz proposes, therefore, a relational, rather than essentialist, approach to defining think tanks. Pointing to the ways in which the think tank concept and the use of the term have developed historically he argues that 'the think tank' should be understood and treated as a discursive creation rather than an objectively existing type or category of organizations with an objectively defined set of characteristics. This is also the approach adopted in this article.

Inspired by Bourdieu, Medvetz analyses the push-and-pull processes through which think tanks, in the U.S. American context, on the one hand, draw different forms of capital from the institutional spheres that they span, and on the other hand, how they strive to play down their links to these spheres and their actors in order to retain the image of autonomy and distinctiveness. Think tanks perform thus continuous balancing acts where they need to project both proximity to, and distance from, academia, the media, politics, and the economic field (Medvetz, 2012). Policy experts involved in think tanks build their professional identity on the idioms associated with each of the spheres—those of the academic scholar, the policy aid, the media specialist, and the entrepreneur—and attempt to reconcile them into a coherent whole (Medvetz, 2010).

Medvetz posits that the reason behind the need for this balancing act is the relative novelty of the think tank as an organizational actor, and of the think tank policy expert as a professional role, entailing a lack of ready-made templates or idioms of their own that these organizations and their staff are able to draw on when constructing narratives about who they are and what they do. This assumption is, presumably, based on a comparison with the four much more established institutional spheres and the professional roles associated with them, that Medvetz sees think tanks as drawing on. 'Novelty' is, however, also relative. In comparison with countries where such organizations have only started to appear in the recent few decades, the U.S. American think tank (which is the object of Medvetz's analysis) is a well-established type of actor, well integrated into American civil society and the American policy system. The question is thus, to what extent the narratives of think-tank(er)s in countries where think tanks are institutional newcomers reflect a similar balancing act.

3. Think Tanks in Sweden: A Background

As noted above, think tanks are a relatively new phenomenon in Swedish civil society and policy system; while the first of this kind of organization has been around since the 1930s in Sweden, it is only since the turn of the Millennium that think tanks have become a more visible type of actor in the Swedish public arena (Åberg et al., 2019). During much of the 20th century, most organizing in Swedish civil society followed the 'popular movements' model, inspired by the

powerful temperance, free-church, agricultural, labour, women's, sports, and environmental movements (Götz, 2003; Micheletti, 1995; Wijkström, 2011). This dominant model encouraged grassroots oriented organizing based on mass membership, internal democracy, and a focus on advocacy and interest representation. As part of the Swedish corporatist system, movement organizations were for a long time treated as a partner to the government (Götz, 2003), with the state lending them political legitimacy as well as financial and structural support. The involvement of movement organizations, but also other similarly organized interests such as trade associations, in the development and implementation of public policy was central to the so-called 'Swedish model' (Rothstein, 1992). The fact that several of the established political parties had close links to one or the other of the movements (Micheletti, 1995), combined with the corporatist public policy system, meant that the movements were able to provide the policy processes with ideational and ideological content through many different channels.

Today this no longer holds entirely true. Since the 1990s, the institutional civil society-state nexus has begun to evolve towards a more pluralist policy system (Blom-Hansen, 2000; Öberg et al., 2011). In the same period, Sweden has experienced almost exponential growth in the numbers of think tanks—from just a handful to around 40 in roughly two decades (Åberg et al., 2019). Elsewhere we have shown that Swedish think tank executives point to the decline of the corporatist interest representation system, as well as to the relative stagnation of the popular movements, as having helped create an institutional niche for the think tank as a new type of policy-oriented actor in civil society (Åberg et al., 2019). In particular, the slow decline of the popular movement as the dominant organizing model in Swedish civil society, and trends such as professionalization, the rise of managerialism, as well as growing public acceptance of new, alternative forms of organizing which are less dependent on individual membership and democratic structures (see Papakostas, 2012; Wijkström, 2011, 2016) appear to have opened up a window of opportunity for think tanks—or, perhaps, what Medvetz (2012) would call a space of think tanks.

Not only Sweden's civil society but also its political and policy system has undergone important transformations during the same period as the number of think tanks has risen. Svallfors (2016) points for example to the diminishing importance of traditional policy actors such as political parties, blue-collar trade unions, and similar organizations; the decreasing visibility and intelligibility of public policy processes; and the altered power balance between labour and capital (to the latter's advantage). These institutional transformations have, he argues, coincided with a decline in political participation among the wider population, as well as with the rise of so-called 'policy professionals'—a social category of people who are interested in working with and influencing public pol-

icy, but not through the traditional, relatively transparent means such as publicly accountable electoral politics or the hierarchical civil service. Rather, policy professionals exercise influence from behind the scenes, in more informal (but no less influential) roles as political advisers, political secretaries, public relations consultants, lobbyists, or think tank policy experts (see also Garsten, Rothstein, & Svallfors, 2015). The increasing importance of policy professionals and their organizations (such as think tanks) is, Svallfors contends, significative of a new kind of elite-driven politics and policymaking, very unlike the traditional corporatist structures of the 20th century.

At the same time, the traditional Swedish political and policy system of the past was not necessarily very egalitarian or grassroots oriented. While Sweden's movement-based civil society was largely organized according to principles of mass participation, democratic access, and grassroots engagement, the political system itself has been described as top-down, centralized, and expert-driven (Steinmo, 2003, 2010). Svallfors (2016) suggests therefore that we should understand the recent decades' transformations less as a change from an egalitarian or populist system towards an elitist one, and more as a turn towards a new type of elite politics, with less transparency and accountability, and with new roles for new kinds of experts.

Today think tanks are on their way to becoming an established part of the Swedish public policy landscape (see, e.g., Sörbom, 2018). While many of them are fairly un-political and/or founded to work on one particular issue only, the most prominent and visible of them belong (with a few exceptions) rather clearly in one of two ideological-political spheres: the progressive sphere which includes among others the labour movement and the Social-Democratic Party, and the liberal pro-market sphere which includes the right-of-centre parties as well as the umbrella organizations of business and industry, such as trade associations. Within these spheres, think tanks are today among the more active and visible policy actors. At the same time, they still to a certain extent constitute an exotic feature in the policy landscape. Thus, we argue that just as in other countries that have scarce previous experience of think-tanking (Boucher & Royo, 2009; Desmoulins, 2009), think tanks in Sweden should be understood as still searching for their collective identity as policy and civil society actors.

4. The Case Study: Design, Methods, and Cases

As mentioned above, previous research points out that the Swedish think tank population consists of around 40, with the first currently operational think tank having been founded at the end of the 1930s, and the majority being founded since the year 2000 (Åberg et al., 2019). Furthermore, most of these think tanks are rather small, with the majority of them having between 1 and 10 employees, and diverse when it comes to the ideologies and interests that they represent.

The empirical research discussed here is based on a qualitative case study of four of the most influential Swedish think tanks. The researchers used a purposive sampling technique to capture the most influential Swedish think tanks as well as cases from different parts of the Swedish political spectrum. Three of the think tanks represent different parts of the labour movement, and one has a liberal/conservative orientation representing more liberal market values and is connected to the trade associations. The selected organizations vary when it comes to such organizational characteristics as size, age, turnover, staff numbers etc., giving us a rather heterogeneous sample which resembles, but cannot be seen as fully representative of, the Swedish think tank population (see Åberg et al., 2019).

In the study, the self-understanding of the four organizations is explored through the eyes of the staff, since these are the actors who are actively involved in the construction, de- and re-construction of organizational identity. As organizations operate through their employees, the opinions, beliefs, and conduct of the latter mirror and become set into the organizational framework. In each of the four organizations, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with the CEO (or equivalent) and additional staff holding titles such as head of communications, head of publishing, chief economist, and research officer. Since the size of the organization, including the number of employees, varies between the organizations not all positions exist in every organization but in total, we conducted 16 interviews. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were all recorded and transcribed *in verbatim*, and subsequently analysed using NVivo and thematic analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Saldana, 2013). In order to keep the respondents confidential, we anonymized the quotes but named the respondents TxRx (Think tank x, Respondent x) in the text to help the reader see how much analytical variation there is within think tanks and between think tanks in the empirical material.

Data analysis proceeded in two steps. First, we went through the interview transcripts using descriptive coding in order to create a rough inductive account of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013). This descriptive coding was done in several iterations as some codes where merged and others were split apart and new codes also emerged from the data. The second step of the data analysis used focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) in order to create themes and subthemes from the first order codes, related to the overarching identity-related question of 'who are we?' These themes and subthemes are presented below.

5. Analysis

Under the overarching headline of 'who are we?' our interview data reveals four themes that consistently appear in the interviews across the studied think tanks. They concern: the organization's founding story, the relationship between the think tank and the movement or sphere it belongs to, the centrality of independence, and the role of research in the identity of think tanks.

5.1. The Founding Story

All the four think tanks studied have an internally strong and coherent founding story that describes them as formed in response to an ideological development in society that their founders wanted to counteract. This appears to be an important and distinctive component of the narrative about what it entails to be a think tank for the organizations studied. The ideological development to be counteracted differs between think tanks, from the Social Democratic hegemony in the 1960s and 1970s to the neo-liberalism of the 1990s and 2000s, depending on the time of the think tank's establishment. As one of the respondents remarks in this context: "Think tanks are in some sense politically anti-cyclical" (Interview, T1R1).

The respondents at the more recently founded think tanks place their stories on a timeline containing other, already existing policy institutes, and describe the reasons for their own creation as related to the need to counteract the influence of those older think tanks. For example, interviewees from the liberal market think tank T4 refer to the near-total social democratic and labour movement ideological and political hegemony in Sweden of the previous decades. By establishing T4, the liberal market sphere hoped to create more concentrated ideological resistance and respond to the large resources that the labour movement dedicated to ideology and the production of policy advice. Conversely, the three younger, left-of-centre think tanks (T1, T2 and T3) were established during the more recent period of the relative ideological hegemony of market liberalism in Sweden, and their accounts highlight the need within the progressive sphere for policy-relevant research and they advise from a different, more 'leftist' ideological angle. In this, the stories told by the think tanks from the two opposing ideological camps mirror each other almost perfectly.

The appearance of think tanks in the political and social landscape and when, how, and by whom they are created, is related to political and social transformations and relations, as noted in Medvetz's studies of think tanks in the U.S. (Medvetz, 2012). Previous research also notes that the advance of think tanks on the political arena and in the public eye seems to coincide with reorientations in the organizational and governance models in the U.S. civil society (e.g., McGann & Weaver, 2000; Rich, 2004). Such reorientations can also be spotted in Sweden. As noted previously in this article, the popular movements, and the popular movement organizations, have been the dominant normative model for how collective mobilization is expected to be organized in Sweden since the early 1900s. Recent decades have, however, unveiled a development towards a civil society that also includes less member-based and more professionalized organizations (Papakostas, 2012; Wijkström & Einarsson, 2006).

5.2. The Relationship to the Wider Sphere

In the interviews, the above-described role of counteracting an undesirable ideological development in society is very consistently framed in terms of the organizations' embeddedness in broader movements or societal spheres: the left-of-centre 'progressive' sphere that includes the labour movement, the trade unions, the Social Democratic party etc. (T1, T2 and T3), and the right-of-centre sphere made up of ideological and/or interest groups which in different ways promote a liberal market agenda in Sweden (T4). The respondents all talk about the missions of their think tanks as being geared towards filling particular niches or functions in 'their' movements and serving the need for professionalized expert advice relating to the spheres that they belong to. Several of them stress this as the core part of the work of their organizations: "The Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Social Democratic Party, i.e., the labour movement—these are the ones we should influence" (Interview, T2R5).

An important part of the think tank's mission is thus to shape the ideological development of their own political camp. In this context, a long-term and more expert oriented perspective becomes particularly important: "I have difficulties seeing that a trade association could do what a think tank does, because a trade association has, by definition, a shorter time horizon, and they are also very clearly lobby organizations" (Interview, T4R13).

Several of the respondents mention that many of the other types of actors in civil society and in the policy arena, especially the more grassroots oriented membership-based organizations, have become more reactive, and governed by the current political agenda. Think tanks as small professionalized organizations, on the other hand, can according to the respondents, play a more long-term role in their movements; they do not have to cater to the whims of members, voters or principals, but are able to address and safeguard the more long-term general interests of their constituents: "[The trade unions] seem to have much shorter time horizons, so all that they do is more connected to day-to-day politics. That's why we can do things that you cannot do in a central organization" (Interview, T1R1).

The interviewees' view of the added value of their organizations appears also to include a strong element of think tanks operating 'outside of the box' in a more general sense, the 'box' being in this context the ways in which policy advice work has traditionally unfolded in Sweden, and something that other, more established policy actors in their movements or spheres are perceived as still being caught up in. Several of the respondents expressed the view that think tanks, to a greater extent than the more traditional policy actors such as politicians, parties, unions, or interest groups through being small elite organizations are free to pursue their policy agendas. This puts think tanks, according to the interviews, in a unique position to be able to notice and pursue important societal issues and needs that might pass under the radar or be impossible to pursue for other policy actors:

> I think they see a value in that there is an organization that can think freely from the interests that govern the unions....An organization that can think a little freer and in the slightly longer term also, which is not constrained by the next collective bargaining process or by what political parties will do or say in the near future. (Interview, T1R2)

By being essentially different from other actors in their own spheres, the think tanks can thus, according to these accounts, provide an added value and take on tasks that other, more traditional policy actors are less well equipped to carry out. This distinctiveness, and more of an elite profile, seems to be an important part of the self-understanding of the ideal-typical Swedish think tank.

5.3. Independence

The third theme that consistently emerges from the interviews as a particular trademark of think tanks is their independence from other policy actors with more pronounced political agendas. Such independence lends, in the eyes of the respondents, a particular legitimacy to the policy advice provided by their organizations:

> This is not a trade union saying something....This is not the Social Democrats. The good thing is that here we have gathered...a few people who can think for themselves, who dare to think for themselves, who have the mandate to think for themselves. What comes from us, it comes from us, it does not come from anyone else. (Interview, T2R5)

It seems utterly important that a think tank has its own independent voice and that it is not perceived as being controlled by the movement it belongs to, or by anyone else. The argument thus seems to be that the think tank gains legitimacy by being an insulated elite professionalized organization rather than by being a membership-based grassroots organization. Importantly, however, this is not only about appearing legitimate in the eyes of the external environment. It is also, and crucially, a matter of the formal independence allowing think tanks to speak uncomfortable truths, and express unpopular views which may in the short run go against the interests of potentially powerful actors in the sphere to which the think tank itself belongs:

> [Our principals] have outsourced some difficult debates to us....They need to have an independent organization that can run a consistent market liberal agenda since there are issues that are good for the market economy at large, but that can be bad for an individual company. (Interview, T4R13)

5.4. The Relationship to Research

Finally, the relationship to (academic) research appears as a central theme in the respondents' understanding of the essence of their organizations. Here we discern a clear need for distinction from other types of actors in the academia:

> I would not say that we are an academic research institution. We are so small, and we do not have the ambition to claim to be [an academic research institution] either, but much of what we do here is research-based. Over the years, we have done a lot of things that one might categorize as research. Many of the report and book authors that we work with are academicians and scholars. And of course, we have the ambition to increase this in the long term. (Interview, T1R3)

None of the four think tanks studied, which are some of the largest and most active in Sweden, say that they produce original research. Rather, they see their contribution in terms of 'repackaging' research that has been conducted elsewhere:

> What we do differently from a lot of universities is that we have an organization that is extremely well-equipped to package and communicate research. We have an infrastructure for it in place, we have strong credibility as well, and many stakeholders that give us the opportunity to reach out with the material. (Interview, T4R13)

In the eyes of the interviewees, the added value—the 'unique selling point'—of a think tanks lies, not only in pure communication and re-packaging skills, neither is it strictly about 'research' in terms of providing pure facts, as these are often already accessible from public sources. Instead, it is to a large extent about adding an ideological dimension to the way in which facts are presented or 'spun': "The facts are there. They are [available from] Statistics Sweden, they are already in the reports from governmental investigations….But when we introduce ideology to it, it becomes dynamite, so to speak" (Interview, T2R6).

Several of our interviewees dwell on the ideological steering of which kind of data is presented and how it is presented:

> If we make a report on the free school choice, for example, and we know that the starting point is that we do not believe that free school choice is a good idea, then it is clear that we formulate the question in that way, and bring in people who can scientifically show that it is problematic. [The free-market think tank] Timbro might think that the free school choice is good, and then they bring in researchers who show that it is good, but both researchers can still be independent people anyway. (Interview, T2R5)

While the relationship to research emerges strongly in the interviews, it is framed in terms of what 'think tanking' is not; it is not about pure academic knowledge but rather about arriving at a research-based product with an ideological angle—thus it differs from both scholarship and from propaganda. At the same time, the respondents were very careful in explaining that their policy advice is soundly anchored in academic research and quality assurance processes.

6. Discussion

The interview data discussed above shows a somewhat unexpected coherence in the way the interviewed heads and staff of the four think tanks studied appear to perceive the essence of 'think tanking.' The organizations included in the study differ from each other in several dimensions such as age, size, and political affiliation. Yet, the respondents' accounts of why their organizations were established, of the ways in which they differ from other types of policy actors, and of the niche(s) that they fill in the policy arena, are very consistent and similar to each other. In many cases, the respondents speak of their own organizations, but just as often they speak about think tanks in general, thus positioning themselves in an organizational category that in their eyes clearly has specific and unique characteristics. This may be interpreted as pointing towards a shared understanding of think tank identity in Sweden, with particular traits that everyone agrees on as central to such an identity. At least it indicates a collective work among think-tankers to conceptualize think tanks as a distinct type of organizational actor in Swedish civil society, which is differentiated both from the classic American think tank discussed in the literature (cf. Medvetz, 2012) but also from the traditional Swedish popular movement organizations. Thus, those active in Swedish think tanks carve out their own space, the Swedish space of think tanks (cf. Medvetz, 2012), in between being connected to and being independent of Swedish popular movements.

The literature on think tanks has previously highlighted their position in between different institutional fields, particularly those of academia, politics, media and economics, as well as their need to distinguish themselves from the organizational actor types prominent in these fields (Hauck, 2017; Medvetz, 2012). The respondents in our study do mention universities and research institutes as two types of academic actors that they see their own organizations as being different from. There is, however, no mention of media actors in the themes we have identified in the interviews. Instead, we find that the organizations studied to a large extent construct their identities in opposition to, or through distinction from, actors in what Medvetz (2012) would call the political and bureaucratic field as well as the economic field—particularly towards actors in the movements or ideological spheres to which they belong as discussed above. They appear to perceive a need to highlight both their

strong embeddedness in their own ideological spheres and the added value, the 'unique selling point,' that they bring to those spheres. An interesting find in the Swedish context is that most of the think tanks studied, which are among the most prominent Swedish think tanks, have strong ties to either labour unions or to trade associations even though their (at least professed) ideology and the issues they focus on are more akin to what is usually connected to social movements and political parties, which can be reflected upon in the light of the model constructed by Medvetz (2012) which has been discussed previously in this article.

It seems that the most central and distinctive organizational characteristic is centred around a founding story in which the think tank is created to counteract an unfolding and undesirable (ideological) development in society. This is further reinforced in those of the younger think tanks which clearly place the older think tanks from the 'other side' as their main adversaries and the reason for their creation. This may both be seen as an attempt to give their own think tank a distinct identity but also as an attempt to collectively place themselves within the Swedish discourse of popular movements and thus create legitimacy for the organizational type by being attached to a social movement or societal sphere. At the same time, another very important organizational trait is being independent of other actors, including those within their own ideological sphere or movement. This independence is often seen as a prerequisite for think tanks to be able to fulfil their role as long term and proactive ideology producers, two other important building blocks of the ideal-typical think tank identity. A balancing act akin to which that Medvetz (2012) describes in his seminal work on think tanks.

In the eyes of think tankers, by being free from many of the constraints that the more traditional policy actors face (such as large organizational bureaucracies, party political considerations, member or voter demands, etc.) as well as by adding a distinctly ideological twist to the research results that they re-package and disseminate, think tanks can provide the public debate with something that no one else can: ideologically grounded, realistic, and far-sighted policy advice. In this context, the studied think tanks' apparent need for differentiation from more traditional Swedish civil society actors has a clear elite–grassroots dimension.

In the interviews, the ability of the think tanks to survive and act in a politically anti-cyclical climate is frequently linked to those of their traits that—in our conceptualization—place them at the elite end of the elite–grassroots continuum: expertise, professionalism, flexibility, and independence. Think tanks connected to, or working in opposition to, different movements and grassroots organizations can, according to our respondents, take advantage of these traits as insulated elite professional organizations to approach issues and apply perspectives that are more difficult for larger grassroots-oriented organizations to address. In the eyes of our in-

terviewees, think tanks can thus be the actor and the voice that the more traditional organizations in their movements or spheres cannot be, especially in times of an adverse political climate. The ease with which our interviewees point to the advantages that their more elite-profiled character provides for their movements or spheres might be interpreted as a sign of a changing norm regarding organizing in civil society in Sweden (cf. Wijkström, 2011).

An interesting next step in research on the Swedish think tank landscape would be to look more closely at the individuals inhabiting and working inside the think tanks to further our understanding of how they build up their own professional identities. As noted above, Medvetz (2010) argues that think tank staff, i.e., what he calls policy experts, create their identity using building blocks from the four different spheres of academia, politics, economics, and media. Would the same patterns be evident in a Swedish context given that the interviewees in this study did not emphasize all of these areas?

Previous research on think tanks highlights the difficulty of defining these organizations, with the think tank concept being seen as empirical, slippery, and hard to tie to a number of clear characteristics. A takeaway from the study is that research on think tanks needs to take contextual factors that may affect the identity of this type of organization more into account.

Swedish think tanks operate in a policy environment which for the last century has been centred around two distinct ideological spheres, but which has also in the last three decades seen a significant ideological shift in society. These two institutional factors appear to be central to the self-understanding of the organizations studied. While the importance of the national institutional architecture for the role and function of think tanks in society has already been approached in the literature (Åberg et al., 2019), the results of the present study point to such architecture being central also to the way in which think tanks collectively work on constructing their and others' shared understanding of what think tanks are.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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