



# Think Tanks, Business and Civil Society: The Ethics of Promoting Pro-corporate Ideologies

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## Abstract

Think tanks became key political and economic actors during the twentieth century, creating and occupying an intellectual and political position between academic institutions, the state, civil society, and public debate on organization and management. Think tanks are especially active in setting frames for what constitutes politically and socially acceptable ways of thinking about economic activity and the rights or obligations of corporations. Their operation and influence has been acknowledged and analysed in political science and policy analysis, but in organization and management studies they are almost entirely ignored. In this paper, we review the existing literature on think tanks to develop an ethical–political framework based on a Gramsci’s account of state–civil society relations, referring to historical case materials relating to a significant Brazilian think tank, the *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais* (IPES). We show how the IPES was successful in bringing then-controversial neoliberal perspectives on management and organization into mainstream political debate, where they could be discussed and ultimately accepted as morally and intellectually legitimate. We note the importance of management education and business schools with respect to think tanks in the development of a hegemonic pro-capitalist interpretation of corporate responsibility, and suggest this is worth more investigation. We conclude by outlining how think tanks are central to civil society acceptance of pro-corporate ideologies, how they might be researched regarding the ethical implications of the work they do, and how our approach provides a foundation for this.

**Keywords** Think tanks · Politics · Business · Management · Hegemony · Ideology · Ethics · Gramsci · Brazil

## Introduction: The Rise of Think Tanks in the Twentieth Century

Unlike many other institutions designed to promote free inquiry, such as universities or some publications, think tanks do not enjoy large endowments, researcher tenure, or subscription revenue to insulate thinkers from paymasters. (The Economist 2017, p. 35)

It is suggestive that the anonymous journalist writing for The Economist, a newspaper founded to promote free market ideologies, finds think tanks problematic in funders’ influence over ideas promoted. The majority of contemporary think tanks promote versions of liberal or neoliberal capitalism that The Economist also elevates as the solution to most social, economic, or environmental issues. The very success of think tanks and their ability to marshal enviable financial resources in the service of a chosen cause seems to provoke discomfort for anyone with a commitment to knowledge and understanding founded on careful analysis of evidence.

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Despite such reservations, think tanks have become perhaps the most significant development of the last half century in how political and economic debate unfolds. This paper addresses the question of how these influential institutional actors developed in many societies around the world during the twentieth century, showing how think tanks became nationally and internationally significant influencers of civil society debate on the rights and obligations of corporations in capitalist societies. We draw on analysis conducted in political science to define think tanks, and combine this with a developing organization studies literature on how and why corporate or corporate-affiliated actors seek to shape political environments. Our argument is rooted in Antonio Gramsci's theoretical outline of the relationship between state, economy, and social action. Gramsci (1971) understands that although methodologically it may be important to separate market and political activities, this can lead to social assumptions as to whether or how mutual influence happens. In practice, market and policy are intertwined, manifest in how societal groups frame, and resolve disputes as to appropriate norms of economic action or what constitutes an acceptable form of management or organization. The notion of hegemony, so central to Gramsci's thinking, is also key to us here: our analysis teases out how the groups that fund and staff think tanks seek ideological dominance through the assertion of moral and intellectual leadership, and attempt to synchronize a dominant ideology across societal groups (Medvetz 2012).

Empirically, we provide a case analysis of the *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais* (IPES, founded 1960, dissolved 1971), usually translated as the Institute for Social Research and Studies. This Brazil-based think tank was founded by mining executive Augusto Trajano de Azevedo Antunes and public utility executive Antonio Gallotti, along with others such as Paulo Ayres Filho, Joao Baptista Figueiredo, entrepreneurs and executives with experience in the finance sector, and Gilberto Huber, heir to a significant fortune (Dreifuss 1980). IPES was financed by Brazilian corporations and multinational companies with local offices in Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. In its founding charter, the think tank self-described as promoting and putting into practice two key ideologies: first, the economic principles underpinning then-US President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, designed to promote capitalist cooperation between the US and Latin America; and second, the social teachings of the 1961 Papal Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, which took Christianity and social progress as its theme. In particular, the IPES claimed to promote the Encyclical's message as to a more 'humane' capitalism.

The IPES remit was also explicit in its purpose of producing a new consensus in Brazilian society on the nature and aims of economic activity and the organization of society. It provided a physical and ideological space for business

owners and corporate managers to congregate around a specific moral and social perspective on the need for a specific form of management, capitalist economic development, and societal organization for economic performance. In particular, the IPES promoted what Hanlon (2016, p. 61) terms 'neoliberal management', in which market, corporation and state form a mutually supportive troika. During its existence, the IPES was also an important centre for the production of anti-Communist materials, in texts and films that supported the idea and practice of economic (neo)liberalism.

The IPES also sought a supra-national position, by bringing together pro-Western, pro-capitalist actors in Brazil. Many of these visited from the US, such as the Business Group for Latin America, the Council for Latin America or the Alliance for Progress. All were heavily influenced by David Rockefeller, then president of Chase Manhattan Bank (Spohr 2016; Starling 1986; Dreifuss 1980). Our analysis also shows contact with actors from the European countries such as the German Friedrich Neumann Foundation, another theologically influenced promoter of individualist liberalism.

Nationalist Brazilian IPES members tended to look to the US as a model. As Spohr (2016) suggests, the IPES was part of the effort to reproduce and disseminate the 'American way of doing business' in Brazil. This highlights how the think tank served as a means of connecting Brazilian businessmen with American officials and business people interested in influencing the political economy of Brazil (Spohr 2016). All members were strictly anti-Communist and often socially conservative Catholics, amassing institutional support from both of those powerful groups (Dreifuss 1980). This hostility to Communism, along with the links drawn between Communism and atheism, were key elements in mobilizing people in favour of the free market economic ideology that IPES promoted (Power 2015).

Our analysis suggests that Leacock's (1979, p. 669) labelling of the IPES as the pre-eminent 'political organization of Brazilian businessmen' of the 1960s is accurate. More specifically, we argue that IPES functioned as a closed safe space where pro-capitalist business people and other social elites could negotiate a shared ideological program on economic policies (Dreifuss 1980, 1981) and 'how to do business'. In this sense, the IPES functioned like other contemporaneous conservative think tanks in the US (Fischer 2002; Parmar 2015). During this period, early in the development of business schools as a global presence, debates on ethics and the purpose of management were very prominent (Khurana 2007). As Khurana (2007, p. 365) argues, however, these debates subsequently narrowed down, such that managerial identity and practice as represented in business schools failed 'to put the subject within any holistic, institutional context'. To this we would add 'political' as a key context, and suggest that think tanks are a key instrument for framing business as a

political activity. As Djelic and Etchanchu (2017, p. 642) highlight, ‘the frontier between economy and polity has always been blurry and shifting and... firms have played for a very long time a political role’, often through funding and supporting think tanks. The corporate decision to fund a think tank that sponsors a certain group of ideas, such as neoliberal management, should be understood both historically and in terms of contemporary dynamics. The dualism between state and market, founded on the assumption that corporations are politically neutral, does not hold after a closer look reveals how much effort and resource corporations and their leaders mobilize to shape political debate through think tanks.

We therefore also respond to Barley’s (2010) call to conduct more research addressing how and why corporations seek to shape political environments. US-based think tanks were an important contributor to the development of American social, political and economic hegemony overseas (Parmar 2002a, b, 2004, 2005, 2015), shaping and disseminating Americanism in management schools around the globe (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015; Khurana and Spender 2012). Our analysis, focusing on the power relations manifest in a think tank’s purposeful interventions as part of attempts to accomplish economic, ethical and political transformation, increases the understanding of think tanks as central to the ethical–political process of describing economic contexts in both intellectual and moral terms. We already know from archival research that some members of the US political establishment sought to export its corporate model through the creation of business schools and private research foundations (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015; Parmar 2002a, b); our analysis further demonstrates how Brazilian corporate, religious, civil and political groups organized to influence each other in the development of a synchronized ideological message, with a respected think tank as the fulcrum of this activity.

We structure the rest of the paper as follows. First, we review research on think tanks, mainly in the field of political science. This body of work focuses on the political nature and effects of think tanks. We relate this to the slowly developing literature on the corporate–political nexus in organization studies, focusing on the potential of analysis that brings relations between such powerful institutions to light. We then provide a brief account of our historical research methodology, a form of critical organizational history. That leads into our archival analysis of IPES, demonstrating its local and conceptual significances, as a case study. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our analysis for understanding the inherently ethical–political nature of civil society debate about the nature of corporations, economy and society, to develop suggestions for further research on think tanks.

## Think Tanks: A Political Apparatus in the Dispute for Hegemony

Gramsci (1971) conceived the relationship the state and the civil society as intertwined and borderless. For him, modern societies overcame the notion of the state as solely a politico-juridical bureaucratic institution that guaranteed order through coercion early in the twentieth century. Gramsci understood that a modern functioning state needed to achieve political hegemony through means other than coercion. He argued that this could be accomplished through building consensus through various private institutions, such as political parties, clubs, unions and business.

In this understanding of society, the state is not the only institutional actor with the potential to exercise political power (Rose and Miller 1992). Political scientists are clear that think tanks are key to understanding the relationship between actors in this paradigm, as they translate knowledges across institutional boundaries to guide political debate in specific ideological directions (Medvetz 2012). Understanding how and why think tanks operate is therefore important to the analysis of the complex interplay of politics, economy, ideology and ethics, as they are able to intervene in policy debate in ways that are ungoverned by regulations that constrain other actors, such as universities.

In organization studies, Barley (2010) suggested recently that synthesizing empirical and conceptual material across organization studies, history and political science is central to understanding institutional interaction of this kind, to gauge the effects of what he calls ‘corporate political action’. We would suggest that Gramsci’s (1971) work provides us with a key means of understanding how state, civil, economic and political actors negotiate ethical–political ideological disputes at the macro and micro levels. Gramsci argues that groups working in different areas of society strive to achieve both moral and intellectual leadership, manifest in how they promote ideological positions on the economy. A wide range of organizations can engage in the ideological clashes that characterize disputes as to the hegemonic moral and intellectual understanding of economic activity (Levy and Egan 2003; Levy and Spicer 2013). To achieve dominance, groups seek compromise and negotiate their programmes with other actors, in order to convince them to accept their ideological resolutions for material disputes. The hegemony that results from such struggles is, according to Gramsci, ethical, political and economic, because the economy and decisions about how to distribute the national income are the decisive nucleus of debate on how to organize modern states.

In contemporary societies, think tanks therefore perform a significant function as part of the policy formation network that develops and disseminates political strategies

for the economy (Levy and Egan 2003). They constitute an important presence in the constellation of organizations that influence society and build hegemony, reframing ideas into discourses that are amenable to powerful actors (Fischer 2003, 2002).

Definitional clarity is important here, because think tanks often purposefully blur their status. Their names often imply academic status through the use of educational terms such as ‘institute’ or ‘academy’. The origin of the term think tank itself is unclear. In everyday use, it signifies a group of experts, qualified academically, politically or through work experiences, which produces reports with a particular economic or political focus. Ideal-typical definitions often emphasize their *lack* of power:

think-tanks are non-governmental institutions; intellectually, organizationally and financially **autonomous from** government, political parties or **organized interests**; and set up with the aim of influencing policy. They have **no formal decision-making power** and claim political neutrality while often **making no secret of their ideological standpoints** (Pautz 2011, 423—emphasis added).

Think tanks reach broad audiences by influencing and bringing together elites from different sectors (Levy and Egan 2003; Fischer 2002). Think tanks often cut across societal groups: they draw on the discursive symbolic resources of higher education; there is usually a substantive aspect to their title (e.g. defence, economics, peace, security); they frequently carry a nominative indication that they are focused on policy or political action. While some suggest excluding think tanks that take an ‘advocacy’ position from analysis (Li 2014), we retain that aspect of the definition here, on the basis of the fact that all think tanks engage in at least implicit advocacy. Our analytical position therefore denies neutrality in the production of knowledge, within think tanks, in their funding foundations, and in their ideological purposes (McGoey 2015; Yep and Ngok 2006). Founders and funders include philanthropists, large corporations, interest groups, charities and political parties.

Think tanks can be set up for a range of practical and political reasons. Ideologically, Blair (2013, p. 449) suggests they tend to be ‘the result of a mixture of foresight, clearly defined need, and the politics of the time’. This implies that think tanks are forward looking, pragmatic, and temporally bounded in their utility. Staffing is usually based on a combination of network membership and pragmatism, a mixture of a small number of permanent and a larger number of temporary or affiliated staff.

A think tank’s functional purpose centres on the provision of politically useful information, analysis and advice to elite groups (Legendijk and Needham 2012; Stone and

Denham 2004), with just the required amount of subject-specific authority to legitimate it (Blair 2013). Written and verbal reports tend to be oriented towards lay comprehensibility. Think tanks’ products frequently attract media attention for their conclusions or proposals for action, and are often criticized for the poor quality of their empirical or conceptual bases (Beloff 1977). However, the products are widely recognized as influential and authoritative in framing public debate (such as by the Economist in 2017). Some also specialize in policy development and implementation. They respond to requests from political overseers, addressing policy puzzles or muddles and contemporaneous trends, navigating carefully between demands to respond to paymasters and the need for institutional credibility constructed through claims to objectivity and independence.

Temporally and geographically, think tanks have proliferated since the 1970s, particularly in countries or regions where wealthy supra-national or global organizations are based (Stone and Denham 2004), especially Europe (home of the European Union) and the US (home of the World Bank and the United Nations). Some think tanks achieve global reach (Stone 2004), and may be present beyond their home countries either as ‘branches’ or as stand-alone institutions. Analysis has, however, focused on the Europe and the US; the presence and activities of think tanks in Latin America in particular have not been extensively researched or discussed (Braun et al. (2004), despite their increasing activities in that area as democracy has been adopted more widely (see also Yep and Ngok (2006) on the lack of research on think tanks in parts of Asia).

Political scientists have suggested that think tanks’ relationship with/to popular media outlets should be a key vector of analysis (Denham and Garnett 2004), especially as the internet and social media have shifted such communication in tone and content. This is clearly a key issue that future research could consider in relation to media cultures of debates related to business and management. Think tank communication or ‘discursive performance’ might be analysed as a means of shedding light on the promotion of specific ethical–political messages (Legendijk and Needham 2012) related to economy and society. In addition, we would highlight the importance of think tanks that act as ‘peak organizations’: ‘associations of other organizations, which, as members, fund the peak organization’s operations. Peak organizations are well situated to become command posts for influencing firms and industries’ (Barley 2010, p. 783).

In sum, from the political science literature in this area and in relation to organization studies, we draw the conclusion that it is important for management scholars to pay more attention to academic intermediaries such as think tanks, especially as legitimating devices that contribute towards promotion of specific political and ethical ideologies of business and management. This in turn suggests that



think tanks should be held politically and socially accountable for the effects of the contributions they make to public understanding. We seek to start this debate as follows. First, we provide a brief outline of the sources we draw on to analyse our case think tank, the IPES, and its activities. We then present an empirical narrative that emphasizes the social and political–economical location of IPES, which we see as central to our understanding the life of the Institute and think tanks as ethical–political actors affecting debate on the purpose of business and management. We then provide a brief discussion of the implications of our analysis, focused on the considerable potential for further research in this empirical and theoretical area.

## Methods and Methodology: Archive Sources and the Construction of an Analytical Narrative

Our analytical purpose is located at the blurred frontier between management history and organizational history (Godfrey et al. 2016). We place great importance on context (Kipping and Üsdiken 2014), using primary historical sources (Lipartito 2014) as data for contextualized case study analysis that seeks relevance beyond the specific instance. We take into account historical complexities as a means of theorizing (Maclean et al. 2016). History here is not an unproblematic reconstruction of the past; rather it is a deductive approximation of events that can never be fully recovered (Weatherbee et al. 2012). Archival research is more insightful when it considers the many narratives that may and may not be included in an archive, and the conditions of their creation (Barros 2016; Decker 2013). Notwithstanding, while archives are therefore always partial, we can build meaningful analytical narrative with the sources (Barros 2016).

Our analysis is based on research in one of Brazil's most prominent source providers, the Arquivo Nacional/National Archive. As happens with every such collection, chance is a component of the sources that survive. Many different logics operate in choosing to retain or discard materials. We treat our sources as monuments, following a critical approach towards the idea of proof and archived files (Le Goff 1992; Schwartz and Cook 2002). What is archived and allowed to survive follows rules that are neither natural nor neutral, and tells of a history bounded by power disputes (Cook 2011; Schwartz and Cook 2002).

We analyse the IPES document collection under ten different categories: courses, movies, photos, budget and finances, the organization and its functioning, patrimony, human resources, communications and correspondence. We were inspired by Bardin's (2011) version of content analysis in our treatment of these sources. Bardin advocates an

open approach to reading sources that highlights how neither reality nor data are transparent, to argue that an analytical method should be developed to enrich the reading of the texts.

Initially we analysed samples of each of the ten categories. This suggested we should focus on correspondence to and from IPES, because there we find communications outside the rigid patterns of the formal language of other documents. This allowed a better understanding of organizations and people involved with the IPES in the development of the ethical–political positions that frame activity and communication. Subsequently, we decided to add source material from four influential Brazilian newspapers: two based in Rio de Janeiro (Correio da Manhã and O Globo) and two based in São Paulo (Folha de São Paulo and Estado de São Paulo). All were sympathetic towards the IPES and operated as approved outlets for the ideological messages IPES sought to communicate. Finally, we included source material from minutes of meetings and formal Institute documents, as a means of confirming our analysis. All translations into English are ours.

## Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais (IPES): A Think Tank in Context and Action

### Modus Operandi: IPES Operations Over Time

As in many countries around the world in the late 1940s and 1950s, Brazil provided fertile ground for the foundation of expert-led think tanks (and continues to do so—see Raufflet and Amaral (2007) on the Abrinq Foundation, for example, founded in 1989). Perhaps the most high profile initiative of that period is the *Instituto Superior de Estudos Brasileiros* (ISEB), sometimes called the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies. As Toledo (1998) observes, intellectuals have always taken active part in political life in Brazil. However, the ISEB differed in its publicly stated purpose of promoting the social and economic cause of hitherto neglected groups, purposefully bringing together ideology, politics, ethics, and social science.

ISEB was funded and supported by the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture from 1955. It provided 'sophisticated articulations of nationalism and development' (Griesse 2007, p. 25) to encourage economic independence through cultural nationalism, socialism, and a specific form of Christianity. The IPES can be understood as both ISEB's precursor and counterpart. In a pamphlet distributed among its associates and to selected newspapers in May, 1962, IPES members argued:

it is necessary that managers manage, and avoid leveling themselves with political marginals. Those marginals can only cause real damage to the nation when those who have great responsibility omit themselves [from public debate].

Among the ‘marginals’, many ISEB associates are listed. Around the same time, the IPES defined itself in a second pamphlet, again distributed to selected Brazilian newspapers (emphasis in original):

The *Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos Sociais* [IPES] is an initiative of Brazilian entrepreneurs, with the participation of liberal professionals. They are united in an *apolitical* entity by the sum of their background and experiences, and their will to find together Brazilian solutions to national problems. The purpose of IPES is the *study of democratic* solutions to the problems posed by national development, the *formation of a legitimate public opinion*, clarified and participative, aimed at strengthening the [democratic] regime and towards economic and social progress. The launching of the Alliance for Progress and the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* gave a new perspective to Brazilian businessmen, *by committing them to the fulfillment of their immediate duties*, from which they cannot escape, [especially] the permanent participation in the public life of the country.

The ideals and visions pursued here are aligned to the stances the Alliance for Progress was promoting at the time, shortly after President Kennedy’s death, but IPES associates claimed independence from it:

Our Institute has no [direct] connection with the Alliance for Progress since we are only propagandists of this grandiose plan that seeks to solve our great economic and social problems (Correspondence, May 1965).

ISEB, as is the case with so many think tanks, did not have a long life—when it was closed by the military government in 1964, it was already experiencing difficulties (Toledo 1998). We describe it here because of its relevance to understanding the context of think tank development, and in tracking controversies in political debate on economy and society. As ISEB closed, the IPES developed as a public voice with political support. In its July 1964 newsletter, IPES claimed:

in the first months after the Revolution [in fact a coup d’état, led by the Armed Forces against a democratically elected President] the IPES became an indefatigable machine for the diffusion of the ideas of the new Brazilian government [a military regime that would endure until 1985]. Its main concern is to undo the

waves of discredit provoked by the international conspirators in the service of totalitarianism, who were committed to presenting to the world a disfigured image of the Brazilian Revolution.

It was inevitable that Brazil, as the largest country in the region, would become a focus for anti-Communist US economic policy. There is no consensus about when the US started favouring a coup to overthrow President João Goulart, who was connected to labour movements and vowing to make reforms that would turn Brazil into a fairer society. However, it is clear that US agents played a key role in the removal of his government (Dewitt 2009; Loureiro 2014). The US had offered a sympathetic ear to the military personnel who wanted to block Goulart’s ascension to the presidency in 1961, and it was obvious that Kennedy’s support for democracy in Latin America was less strong than his fear of a series of Cuban revolutions on a larger scale (Loureiro 2014).

US intervention in this area took a unique form. Agents helped to brand old but effective ethical touchstones such as God, family and liberty, and indirectly or covertly helped finance mass political demonstrations and opposition campaigns (Weis 2001). This activity could take unusual forms. The US government, for example, was keen to use the powerful image of Brazilian housewives marching against the government, in such a way that it could portray protest against a constitutional government as a democratic and ethically progressive act (Power 2015). The US also used the Alliance for Progress to lend money to opposition governors to build alliances in the case of a crisis (Dewitt 2009; Loureiro 2014; Weis 2001).

The Alliance for Progress had been founded on President Kennedy’s promise to tackle anti-Americanism and Communism in Latin America (Loureiro 2014). Its aims were close to those of the Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek in the late 1950s. Kubitschek oversaw a push towards Brazilian industrialization and many public works, including the country’s capital Brasilia. He also pursued an aligned but independent foreign policy, to promote what he called Operation Pan America (OPA) to increase cooperation. The initiative was an important marker that pushed the US towards a new approach in relation to Latin America (Darnton 2012; Weis 2001). The Kennedy administration thereby sought to combine negative or obstructive measures with specific forms of economic development, seeking to secure Latin American countries from Soviet influence (Hakim 2011).

The Catholic Church also supported a number of conservative political and economic movements, often in the hope of marginalizing liberation theology and pockets of Church support for the more radical trade unions. The IPES helped the Church in this by funding conservative Catholic trade unions (Círculos Operários) and encouraging contributions

from major landowners and various other pro-capitalist groups (Dreifuss 1980, 1981; Power 2015; Ramirez 2012). The rapid incorporation of large masses of people into the urban proletariat challenging the traditional social order, combined with the diminution in State control compared to urban industrialist political power, were also significant in this. It is in this complex context of multiple competing actors each with its own ideological purpose that the IPES was founded, drawing on established think tank practice and extending it further as a means of influencing public debate and political action.

### The Construction of a Legitimate Perspective

Formally, IPES was founded as a non-profit organization to devote resources to non-partisan research, educating people, business and government (Abelson 2002). In the more colourful words of one influential Brazilian economist Roberto Campos:

The impetus of the reforms of Castello Branco's government was in part due to the previous work from Jorge de Mellos Flores and [Mario Henrique] Simonson at **the IPES**, which was some kind of think tank created by Goulart to engineer **a liberal alternative to Jango's** [the nickname of the former president João Goulart] **socialist craziness** (Campos, 1997, our emphasis).

The IPES promoted ideas prevalent within the economic elite of Brazilian society, and brought together disparate arguments against progressive social reforms, to encourage enforcement of an authoritarian view of liberal economics and conservative politics (Dreifuss 1980, p. 981). It was organized into regional branches, the most important in the key economic cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre. There were many divisions within IPES, each responsible for production of different materials that would support the new military government, frame societal debate, and intervene in academic life (Cardoso 2011). One of its branches was also specifically responsible for denouncing 'Communist infiltration' in public life.

The business owners and business managers united by IPES created the most influential group of the many trying to overthrow the Brazilian constitutional government of late 1950s and early 1960s (Dreifuss 1980, 1981; Spohr 2016; Starling 1986). They provided low-profile but influential support to the military, organizing sympathizers in the armed forces, and arguing publicly against support for progressive reforms. Although the IPES received most of its money from Brazilian business owners, managers and companies, it also counted on substantial support from multinationals and the US government (Dreifuss 1981; Ramirez

2012). One of the companies that contributed most significantly was the Brazilian arm of Esso:

We note with great pleasure the generous donation from Esso Brasileira de Petróleo S.A to the Institute for Social Studies and Research - IPÊS/GB, worth fifteen hundred 'Cruzados Novos'. This gesture is a demonstration of appreciation, but it is also a stimulus that induces us to persevere in fighting for the sake of freedom and democracy, grounded in the principles of Christian faith and working for improvement and toughening of Free Enterprise in our country. [...] we express ourselves in the name of the youth who are preparing in this House for the exercise of dignifying business ventures (Correspondence, April 1969)

As in the Brazilian branches of many other multinationals at the time, Esso's office was led by a member of the Armed Forces. The US government also made significant contributions, channeling funds to IPES in order to support their activities. This showed up in attempts to help the Institute influence Brazilian regional elections in 1962, a sign of the strategic relevance achieved by the IPES, while also showing that the US had few concerns about bypassing Brazilian sovereignty. Receiving money either from foreign multinationals or foreign governments was, however, a double-edged strategy for IPES (Ramirez 2012). Many supporters were fiercely nationalist, and felt that accepting help from alien powers could affect the legitimacy of their institutions. In addition, after congressional hearings on forms of financing, the IPES had to deal with those funds with more caution, concealing their origins more effectively.

Since some of the money channelled by the US came via the Alliance for Progress, the business people associated with the IPES also began to seek reciprocal influence over the Alliance (Spohr 2016). They wished to guarantee that their economic and political interests would be protected, while increasing collaboration with their American counterparts (Spohr 2016). Balancing the need not to appear anti-American and the desire to promote nationalism, IPES members dedicated considerable effort to framing discussions of the Brazilian economic situation and the alleged Communist menace. Due to the high level of participation of business people as financial supporters, the IPES also had a great deal to say about their role in society (Loureiro 2014). The Institute sponsored newspapers articles, made short movies, promoted theatrical plays, commissioned pamphlets and books, and sought help from the US Embassy book program to edit and distribute publications (Black 1977). It also counted on the sympathy of the US media towards their objectives (Weis 1997).

As they gained in confidence and influence during the 1960s, the Brazilian business people involved with the IPES began to explore the idea of an international alliance with

counterparts from other Latin American countries (Spohr 2016). This can be understood as indicative of a wider reshuffling of emerging political forces in Latin America (Ramirez 2012). The IPES approach centred on limited concessions towards workers, to undermine support for labour-oriented parties manifest in the growing ‘labourism’ political movement. It is important to mention here that there was an asymmetry between the economic power held by the business elites and the political power they had over the Brazilian state in the beginning of the 1960s (Dreifuss 1981).

Members of the Institute embraced the inter-related ideas that they were saving Brazilian democracy, fighting corruption, reinforcing religious freedom and combating subversion, key themes that appear in communications produced from within the Institute (Bortone 2014; Cardoso 2011; Power 2015). The IPES crafted the notion of a Manichean battle between good and evil, reflected in how they were portrayed in the two main news reports in the US about the heroic participation of the ‘businessmen’ in the coup d’etat against João Goulart (Siekman 1964; Weis 1997).

In its final moments, the IPES became a victim of its success in reframing public debate and aspects of state policy. Its inability to adapt to the new context developed by the government it helped construct brought about its end (Ramirez 2009). Various members of the IPES resigned from it to occupy state positions, directing reforms in national and local government structures (Bortone 2014; Ramirez 2009). This loss of qualified people was made worse with the challenge of attracting more professional technicians who could frame ideological arguments in a more neutral wording fit for the new order. It is also important to note the statist and authoritarian route taken by the new military regime, which may have contributed to the weakening of the institute since it had economic liberal roots (Bortone 2014).

Without a clear political enemy in João Goulart, the Institute, already divided in debate about the tactics that should be used to combat Communism and how to press for an even more liberal economy, had to be reoriented. However, the number of associates fell year by year, and even after becoming an organization oriented towards public interest, the IPES could not sustain itself, closing its doors in the early years of the 1970s. Brief as IPES’ existence was, we are reading it here as a paradigmatic case of the way business people can operate in the public arena to influence governments and society.

### **Think Tank Development and Activity: A Three-Stage Process**

From this case description, we can suggest that the IPES passed through three moments in its development. First, the Institute was represented as an advocacy organization,

creating programmes to counter Presidential proposals, advertising its worldview openly or through indirect channels:

Important business sectors took a stand in the discussions that led to popular enlightenment, but this is not yet complete. The commitment to study and solve the problems that are tying up Brazil, which open a national flank to the social agitation of the forces that do not represent the popular aspirations or incarnate the national interests, cannot cease. On the contrary, the Brazilian businessmen that also fight for reforms must renew their efforts so that Congress will adopt the laws that will liberate the people and the Brazilian economy from the obstacles that tie [the development of the country]. (IPES monthly bulletin, February 1963)

The documents we have analysed to construct our case suggest that members of the IPES sought to influence public opinion in different ways during each of these moments. In its early stages, members of the Institute tried to raise public support and challenge government proposals through publication of alternative versions of law reforms proposed by government. In a way, the Institute tried to emulate a shadow cabinet. The clearest explanation of this strategy is found in a letter from a key member of the Institute, Jorge Oscar de Mello Flores, to IPES president, Glycon de Paiva:

We shall prepare, as fast as possible, versions of the reforms proposed by the leftists, people from the Brazilian Labor Party and demagogues, considered vital to our country.

Those projects are (1) agrarian reform [...]; (2) banking system reform [...]; (3) urban reform [...]; (4) administrative reform [...]; (5) tax reform [...]; (6) electoral reform [...]. Various advantages would come from those proposals: we would oppose our technical projects to the demagogical ones. We would show that the productive classes do not object to reforming the system (Correspondence, 1962)

The writers expected IPES associates and other sympathetic business people to support their alternative proposals. A group of legislators that received direct and indirect financial supports from IPES was tasked with presenting the alternatives on the floor of the parliament. This approach is a relatively conventional think tank or pressure group tactic.

The Institute also supported an arm called the ‘Public Opinion Group’ with responsibility for encouraging news outlets to report IPES-sponsored opinions and perspectives; this group was especially active during the second moment of the think tank’s development. This tactic proved relatively straightforward, unsurprisingly, as the Institute counted in its ranks people from important



media vehicles such as the owner of the biggest Brazilian newspaper of that time, *O Estado de São Paulo*. The Institute sponsored radio news programmes and counted on broadly sympathetic coverage from most Brazilian news media outlets. Alongside this, the Institute often provided financial aid to trade unions that worked closely with the Catholic Church. The business people congregated around IPES wanted to promote the idea that it was possible to achieve harmony between workers, managers, the mainstream conservative Church, and the interests of capital owners.

The roles of the state in the Brazilian economy and Brazilian society more generally were also a primary concern of the Institute, as outlined in correspondence from 1963: ‘it is indispensable to write a *working paper* and distribute it to the members of congress and people in conferences [sponsored by the institute] [...] the IPES wants to engage in a study of the problems of statism’. In these ways, the group made effective use of links into parliament and news outlets to promote themselves as representing ‘the new mentality of business people, using mass media to promote these arguments through articles, speeches and interviews pointing to democracy as the best form of government and showing the risks of extreme solutions’ (Correspondence, 1962) at different moments. In the second moment, after the coup d’état, the Institute began to operate more as a mediator between businesspeople and government, inviting ministers and other public agents to conferences and providing answers to questions formulated by IPES associates. The Institute operated as a central agency in the placement of members in and around key offices of state in the new government. Immediately after the coup at least seven IPES members achieved important positions in the government. Among those were general Golbery do Couto e Silva, who led the Institute’s ‘intelligence unit’, denouncing and outing supposed communist agents in Goulart’s government. Golbery went on to become the head of the state’s National Intelligence Service (the feared SNI), responsible for hunting those considered as enemies of the regime. Other names linked to the institute also became part of the new dictatorial government: Roberto Campos (Ministry of Economic Planning), José Garrido Torres (President of the Brazilian National Development Bank, BNDES), Denio Nogueira (Central Bank, BC), and Paulo de Assis-Ribeiro (President of the Institute for Land Reform, IBRA). The BC and the IBRA were formulated following studies conducted and published by the IPES; banking and land reforms followed predictions from the early letters written by Jorge Oscar de Mello Flores, quoted above. The presence of Roberto Campos in the Ministry of Economic Planning also allowed for ideas developed within IPES to become a multi-year economic development plan (PAEG).

In sum, we would suggest that in the immediate aftermath of the coup, the IPES became very powerful, due to various direct connections to the new government:

Hence the IPES/GB was prepared to serve as a link between private enterprise and the government, promoting a series of debates under the general heading ‘Perspectives on National Entrepreneurship’ in 1966. Hence also the importance of their participation through questions [in committees and parliament] that seek to clarify points that may seem unclear (Correspondence, February 1966).

This same *modus operandi* appears in other letters:

We deem it of paramount importance and of immediate interest to provide, whenever possible... direct contact with the representatives of the Government from which it results, [to provide] not only a better understanding of the problems that afflict the business environment, but that also allows the Governmental authorities to listen to the views and the yearnings of that laborious class (Correspondence, March 1966).

It also started its public defence of the military regime:

We have a special interest in spreading truths and concepts aimed at strengthening the democratic [sic] regime, unmasking the illusory Communist doctrine, whose enslaving practice we wish, with all our strength, to see away, at least from our America (Correspondence, July 1966).

The support for the military dictatorship, portrayed as a democratic regime, is affirmed in other documents.

This brings us to the third moment, during which IPES members recognized the potential of education and learning to promote ideologies and frames for debate. At this point, the IPES was in a certain sense at the height of its power, with well-positioned government officials as active Institute members. This period lasted for around three years:

The ministry for commerce and industry signalled his willingness to accept the invitation from IPES’ businessmen, who had a recognized participation in the March 31st movement [...]; This year agenda prepared by the [IPES] also contains lectures by the president of the National Bank for Economic Development [*Banco Nacional de desenvolvimento*] [...] of the president of the Central Bank [...], the president of Banco do Brasil [the Brazilian state owned bank] [...] and [...]. ... of the president of the National Housing Bank (Folha de São Paulo, 24/03/1966).

As the new dictatorial government was being consolidated, the IPES tried to change its focus again. It had been created as an anti-Goulart, pro-market think tank, and

therefore had to be repositioned after its ideological objectives had been accomplished politically. After brokering meetings between government and business people, the Institute focused on offering business management education. That is made explicit in a letter to General Golbery do Couto e Silva, then Dow Chemical's CEO in Brazil:

In the course of the last few years, the entity [IPES] has progressively assumed characteristics of an education body in the service of business. [...] But in order for the IPES to continue in its educational function, the support is necessary of all those who believe, as we do, in the effectiveness of individual initiative and in the privatization of the instruments of production as the driving force for national development (Correspondence, May 1970).

During the years 1966 and 1967, the Institute moved closer to becoming an educational organization, offering courses in management and finance:

**EDUCATION GROUP:** In the educational area, the Institute progressively broadens its scope of action, with assistance to the company through a system of courses both technical and professional, aiming at reducing costs and increasing productivity [...] (IPES, Informative pamphlet, October 1968).

The courses presented in the document were on Project Evolution and Review Technique [PERT], Introduction to Management, Mathematics for finance, and a Higher Education Course in Finance.

This last course was a full-time programme for graduate students. It had 27 people enrolled in its first iteration (Information pamphlet, March 1969), which can be considered a success, since Brazil did not, and still does not, have a strong tradition in full-time management education courses. It also happened at the same time the Institute established alliances with other institutions in higher education, such as the Catholic University at Rio de Janeiro, Campinas and Sao Paulo.

Thus, from a combative stance towards government, the Institute moved to a more collaborative attitude and started focusing its efforts on offering educational courses to partners and middle managers from sponsoring organizations. Besides those already mentioned, the short courses offered by the Institute focused on a wide range of themes: 'Brazilian Actuality', 'Current Brazilian Portuguese', 'Dynamic Reading' and 'Business Management'.

We could interpret this as evidence that the Institute was genuinely liberal and only against statist policies and communism. That would make the IPES one of the early champions of a truly liberal order in Brazil. However, the think tank also represented a very common brand of political philosophy which defines the realization of liberty as based almost entirely on free market economy, notwithstanding

an authoritarian regime. One of the few letters that put the position of the Institute plainly is a missive from the IPES' president to the head of the National Security Service, General Carlos Alberto Fontoura, after the acceptance of a new military dictator by Congress:

On the political situation in our country, emphasizing a possible collaboration, my friends and I will eventually take pleasure and honor in giving to **the Government of the Revolution, which we all strive to establish and maintain in our troubled Brazil**. [...] the kind of government that the revolution necessarily had to create in order to correct the errors and damages of the social and political structure of the country is founded mainly and necessarily on prestige and military and civic potential of the Armed Forces [...] I believe, Mr. General, that there are organizations and contingents of men of companies in this country [...] who wish to give something of themselves to Brazil [and] should be incorporated. Of this group, the one I am most attached to is the IPES [...] **composed of civilian and military men, who managed to create a team spirit, and to push for decisive action for the Revolution that we all wanted** (Correspondence October, 1969, our emphasis).

The IPES maintained a trajectory of lobbying, and put pressure both on João Goulart's democratic government and the regime following the military coup. The IPES moved to offer services to the organizations that contributed to it, through courses directed at the business community that promoted a particular (neo)liberal political economic perspective on management and business. In this sense, we would suggest that the IPES made use of an innovative form of ideological advocacy (Lagendijk and Needham 2012), in the form of management education. This is perhaps its most interesting legacy empirically and analytically, pointing towards the need for greater recognition of the ideological aspects of the political participation of business in this form.

In this, the IPES contributed to laying the foundations for a 'second wave' of management education in Brazil. Prior to the 1960s, the country had thousands of vocationally oriented commerce schools (Barros 2016), but only a handful of business schools, in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Minas Gerais (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015). In 1959, the Brazilian government signed a deal with the US state to facilitate the development of new business schools and consolidate those already existing, transferring money and expertise to a handful of Brazilian institutions (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015). The deal was signed around the same time that the Ford and Carnegie Foundations started pushing for a more academic approach towards management education (Augier et al. 2005; Khurana and Spender 2012; Khurana et al. 2011).

The Ford Foundation was especially active in influencing Brazilian business schools (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015).

Thus, in the 1960s, there were emerging efforts aiming to Americanize Brazilian management, and to spread managerial theory and practice as an ideological weapon in the Cold War (Cooke and Alcadipani 2015; Barros and Carrieri 2013). The IPES advocated for academic training of managers over on-the-job preparation and hereditary selection, including by offering post-graduate courses in management. This is, we would suggest, reflected in contemporary think tanks offering management and leadership development, and merits considerable further research.

## Conclusion: From the Past to the Future of Think Tanks

We know from previous analyses that the neo-Marxist (Adler 2009) arguments and ideas of Antonio Gramsci can shed light on power relations between corporations and civil society (Levy and Egan 2003) or corporations and higher education (Chertkovskaya et al. forthcoming). We have shown here how the development of IPES as a think tank can be analysed as an exemplary case in this respect, especially in relation to its construction of knowledge as a productive resource (Adler 2009) for political change. First, we have shown the potential in understanding how ideas transit from small groups to wider social groups through think tank promotion of specific ethical–political positions on business and economy. The IPES pursued a diverse set of activities, all oriented towards political change insofar as the political structural conditions affected capital’s freedom to extract, employ, and trade, within Brazil and beyond, in support of the dominant form of capitalism of the moment emanating from the US. The development of a persuasive ideology was central to this, leading us towards an analysis that draws on Antonio Gramsci’s work for its perspective on the intersection of knowledge and ideology.

Second, we have shown that a think tank’s trajectory may be significant for management and organization studies not only because it was mainly a politically influential organization financed and controlled by a specific group of business people, but also because it exemplifies how that elite develops a specific space to agree on a distinctive ideology and construct a unified position with claims to objectivity, for promotion in the public arena. This was, as Parmar (2015) argues in relation to think tanks in the US, a social project that focused on institutionalizing specific ways of managing economic change through political action, in ways that reinforced the elite grouping’s position. The involvement of corporate actors, and the resources they are able to bring, surely merits much more detailed analysis. Third, the IPES’

movement from an advocacy organization, passing through a lobbyist group phase, and then turning its focus towards management education, is of use in understanding the power of think tanks in shaping debates inside business schools.

Even though we chose a think tank that no longer exists for our analysis, we would suggest that the ways the IPES operated are closely related to the practices used by contemporary business associations, Barley’s (2010) ‘peak organizations’, to put pressure on governments and convince wider social groups of their ideas (cf. McGoey 2015). By means of a historical example with a significant amount of data at our disposal, we were able to look behind the public facade which was constructed around a classically liberal–democratic organization. What we saw was a group that supported democracy only by convenience, and that was more preoccupied with a freer economy in a (neo)liberal market sense, cleaving to a particularly US-oriented understanding of business and management, no matter what the social cost.

Summing up, we would suggest that to understand the many ways that business corporations choose to influence society is of utmost importance if we are to understand the forces that shape our world (Barley 2010), especially country-specific forces and their effects. To understand the trajectory and *modus operandi* of think tanks is but one more step in moving towards a more transparent society in which people can see where and by whom decisions are taken (Medvetz 2012). For a longer time than necessary, scholars working in management and organization studies have mostly ignored the ethical and political powers of think tanks, especially those intertwined with the shifting power structures of global capitalism (Adler 2009), to shape public debate and state policy.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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