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# Switzerland: Think Tanks and Vested Interests in Swiss Policy Making

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## Abstract

*This paper analyses the role of think tanks in Swiss policy making. Starting from the relationship between interest groups and the state, which has been shaping Swiss policy making for a long time, we hypothesize that these structures offer good possibilities for scientific arguments and ideas to influence the process of policy making. Our observations from a recent example indeed illustrates that think tanks can use the same channels as vested interests to bring in their know-how. Furthermore, we conclude that the characteristics of the political system, e.g. direct democracy and the consensual alignment particularly influence the chances of think tanks to intervene. In this exchange vested interests and think tanks do not really interfere with each other, but rather they complement each other both having their strong points at different stages of the policy making process.*

## Introduction

In 1999 fourteen Swiss enterprises founded “Avenir Suisse”, a think tank disposing of a budget of more than seven million Swiss francs per year, which is involved in promoting the social and economic development in Switzerland. While in the Anglo-Saxon countries such privately financed, non-profit research institutes have been widespread since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thunert,

2003: p.30; Weaver, 1989) in Switzerland this was a new phenomenon. And still today, think tanks following the classical US-model are rare. However, similar to other countries a considerable number of smaller research institutes have evolved during the last 20 years, often focusing on more specific issues. Different to the classical Anglo-Saxon think tanks they are typically doing mission oriented research and/or are financed through a university affiliation.

While in the USA political consulting by external experts is seen as an important factor of influence on how “government think” (Weiss, 1999), in other countries like for instance Germany the weight of think tanks in the political process is judged more skeptically (Thunert, 2003). The common argument in this controversy is that the position and the influence of think tanks are a function of country-specific institutional and cultural characteristics (Thunert, 1999: pp. 35f.; Weaver, 1999: pp. 285f.; Weiss, 1999: pp. 292ff.; Gellner, 1995: pp.46-61).

This is the starting point of this article, which analyzes the question of how and to what extent think tanks can influence Swiss policy making. Until now, think tanks in Switzerland have been a largely unexplored field. This article must therefore be seen as a first step in an area, in which further research still needs to be done.

Against this background we start with an outline of the existing think tanks in Switzerland. Following Thunert (1999: pp. 10) we define think tanks as “privately or publicly financed, application-oriented research institutes, whose main function is it to provide scientifically founded, often inter-disciplinary analyses and comments on a broad field of relevant political issues and propositions”. Thereby we distinguish “advocacy tanks”, “academic think tanks” and “mission oriented research institutes” (see Thunert, 1999; Weaver, 1999; Gellner, 1995). In the Swiss context a fourth category can be referred to: For a long time vested

interests like employers' and employees' organization have been providing their know-how and ideas to the political process and thus influenced policy making. In this sense unions and employers' associations have also fulfilled and still fulfill some functions of a think tank. In the following, they will be called socio-economic think tanks (Karlhofer 2006).

One approach to go into the matter of think tanks and their influence on policy making in Switzerland is to take interest groups and their role in Swiss policy making as a starting point (Linder, 2005; Mach, 2004; Kriesi, 1998: pp. 265-277).<sup>1</sup> Organized interests play an important role in the political process in Switzerland, last but not least due to direct democracy, which gives them a veto right in legislation. The possibility to block parliamentary decisions with a referendum led to the development of an extensive pre-parliamentary process, in which all important political actors are integrated in order to find a for all acceptable compromise. We hypothesize that these well structured relations between the state and para-state respectively private actors offer good possibilities also for the "new" think tanks to bring their scientific know-how and ideas into the political process.

The article unfolds as follows. First, an overview of the existing think tanks in Switzerland and their characteristics will be given. Afterwards the influence of think tanks in Switzerland will be discussed from a theoretical point of view. Starting from the international debate on corporatism, we will thereby focus on vested interests in the Swiss political system. Then, the illustrative example of the reform of the right to sue of the environmental protection organizations is followed by an in-depth discussion of the political process and the possibilities for think tanks to influence its results. The article completes with concluding remarks.

## **Think Tanks in Switzerland - development and structure**

Describing the development and the structure of Swiss think tanks, we follow the typology prevalent in the literature, strongly influenced by the Anglo-saxon developments. As already mentioned, we distinguish “advocacy tanks”, affiliated to specific ideological ideas, “mission oriented research institutes” and “academic think tanks”, also called “universities without students” and typically affiliated to university institutes (Thunert, 2003; Weaver, 1999; Gellner, 1995). Following the policy-focus of this paper we restrict the comments on policy-oriented think tanks in Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> As a fourth category we describe socio-economic think tanks, which are economic interest groups like trade unions, and employers’ associations. They are traditional suppliers of political research and consulting in Swiss politics, and are therefore called the “old” Swiss think tanks compared to the “new” think tanks in the Anglo-Saxon sense.

We start with academic institutions, which were the first to emerge and have been for a long time the most important actors in the Swiss arena of “new” think tanks. For decades, the IUHEI (Institut universitaire de hautes études internationales) in Geneva enjoyed an almost monopolistic position as academic partner and advisor for Swiss foreign policy and diplomacy. Some research units of the Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich and Lausanne) have a longstanding cooperation with public administrations. Examples are the EAWAG (Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology) or, until 2003 the Institute for Forestry, which led the scientific background for federal policies in the decades after World War II. The most prominent example was the Institut für Orts-Regional- und Landesplanung (ORL, Institute for local,

regional and national land use planning) in the 1970s. At that time, the Federal government aspired to a strong coordinating in the long term planning of land use, infrastructure and urbanization. For this purpose the ORL, mandated by the Federal Government, developed and published nine "Landesplanerische Leitbilder" (national concepts – sort of scenarios – for the future development). Moreover, a tenth scenario was elaborated, which reflected the preferences of the Conference of the Directors of the Federal Administration (Chefbeamtenkonferenz). This can be seen as an example of an "outsourcing" of the development of knowledge for an entire policy field. However, this was not successful for several political reasons. First, the position of the Federal government in national land use policy was challenged by the political right. This led to the defeat of a first national law in a popular referendum in 1976. Second, the 1970s were characterized by a rising critique against the "technocratic" approach on policies. The ORL-Institute, the "planners at the Limmat", and their national scenarios were a preferred target of this critique. Third, after the defeat of the law in 1976 the federation had to renounce on a strong steering policy on the national land use. The ORL-Institute lost a good part of its function. Its personnel, which counted for up to 100 persons, was considerably reduced and partly transferred to the federal administration.

Yet, the example is typical for two developments of the modern welfare state. First, in Switzerland like in other countries the state is characterized by a growing need of scientific knowledge and applied research. The knowledge is necessary for the development of successful policies as well as for legitimation purposes. In Switzerland this "expertise culture" is quite pronounced. Second, governmental agencies are the prime clients (and consumers!) of this knowledge, which in the Swiss context is called "Ressortforschung". It can be acquired internally (research

intra muros)<sup>3</sup> or externally (research extra muros). The latter corresponds to the old Swiss tradition of outsourcing public functions, and it created a fast growing market for academic and mission oriented research institutes.

More recent examples of academic think tanks, which still form an important part of the think tank arena in Switzerland, are the “Institut de hautes études en administration publique” (IDHEAP) in Lausanne (founded in 1982) or the “Kompetenzzentrum für Public Management” (KPM, founded in 2002) in Berne, which are both quite strongly linked to their corresponding universities. Furthermore, the institutes of political science at the universities of Geneva, Zurich and Berne are also active in applied research for the administration, international organizations etc..

The Swiss Peace foundation, Swisspeace, in Berne with the aim to promote independent peace research, is not directly affiliated to a university. The linkages to academia through personal connections are however quite substantial. Thus, Swisspeace is also best in line with an academic think tank.

A similar background has the Swiss Forum for Migrations Studies (SFM). Its Foundation in 1995 was initiated by the “Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences”, which shows its clearly academic founding. The SFM is financed by various private and public institutions, the Foundation for Population, Migration and Environment (PME) and the University of Neuchâtel among them. However, today the SFM is doing mainly contract research, the Swiss administration being its main client. In this sense the research institute is in a way both an academic think tank and a mission oriented research institute.

Academic think tanks earn part of their budget by their university, while another part comes from mandates of administrations. Sometimes, academic think tanks are also partially financed by the private sector. An example is the

“Konjunkturforschungsstelle der ETH Zürich” (KOF), which is specialized in economic research. It is jointly funded by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zürich), the Swiss National Bank and private enterprises.

Likewise evolved from the University is “BAK Basel Economics” (BAK), which is specialized in regional economic analysis. Today however, BAK is an incorporated company owned by private individuals and 50 institutions (cantons, communes and associations among them), and can best be called a “mission oriented” or “contract research institute”.

Narrow linkages between academia and "mission oriented research" (Thunert, 2003; Weaver, 1999: pp. 271ff.; Gellner, 1995: p. 34) as we find for instance at the SFM, KOF or BAK Institutes are not the exceptions but rather the rule in Switzerland. It is therefore often difficult to distinguish between "academic" and "mission oriented research institutes". Even private mission oriented research institutes – or consulting agencies typically specialized in a particular policy field – are often directed by academics. The number of consulting agencies who do mission oriented research has been strongly growing during the last two decades. The following table 1 is a selection of think tanks that do typical mission oriented research for public administrations at the local, cantonal or federal level:

Table 1: mission oriented research institutes (selection)

Think tank	Main research
BAK Basel Economics, Basel	Regional economic analysis
Büro für arbeits- und sozialpolitische Studien (BASS), Berne	Labor market, social politics
Büro Vatter, Politikforschung & -beratung, Berne	health/social policy, environment/traffic/regional planning, the Swiss political system and political coordination
Econcept, Zurich	Energy/traffic/environment, public management, labor and housing market, social security/integration/participation, science management
Ecoplan, Bern	Economy, society, traffic, energy, environment
Evaluanda, Geneva	Evaluation in different sectors
GfS-Forschungsinstitut, Berne, Zurich	Political participation, communication, society
Infras Forschung und Beratung, Zurich	society, economy, environment, traffic, telecommunication, energy and development
Interface Institut für Politikstudien, Luzern	transport/environment/energy, social security/integration, education/family, reforms and health
Landert, Farago& Partner, Zurich	Social science, evaluation
Itéral management S.A., Lausanne	Public sector reform
Social insight	Research, evaluation and consulting in the area of sociology
Synergo, planning, consulting and management, Zurich	Traffic, mobility, regional planning, political processes

*Sources:* seval.ch; institutes' homepages.

Even if these private research institutes exhibit considerable activities – for example the business volume of the BAK amounts to CHF 3.8 Millions per year – they are not very visible in the public discourse. Rather, they provide background information used by political actors



and especially the administration for the development of new policies and for the preparation of political decisions. Exceptions are the research institutes of the “Swiss Association for Empirical Social Research” (GfS-Forschungsinstitut) specialized in political surveys and the analyses of popular votations. Its so-called “Vox-Analyses” are probably of the best known publications of political scientists.

Let us now turn to the "advocacy tanks", which are by far less numerous than academic and mission oriented research institutes. “Avenir Suisse”, which we already mentioned in our introduction, is clearly the best known and most noticeable Swiss think tank. Founded in 1999 by 14 enterprises Avenir Suisse disposes of a budget of 50 million Swiss francs for the first seven years of its existence. As the funding suggests, the think tank is clearly aligned with neo-liberal ideas and is called the only real think tank of the Swiss Economy (Tagesanzeiger, March 10, 2003). Avenir Suisse can, thus, be named an “advocacy tank” (Thunert, 2003: pp. 31f.; Weaver, 1999: pp. 72f.). It has however to be mentioned that Avenir Suisse is not too far away from an academic think tank as all collaborators possess an academic degree, most of them even having a PhD. Additionally, in its studies the long-term perception is focused on, which is also a typical element of an academic think tank.

The often controversial ideas of Avenir Suisse find on and off their way in the public discourse. Examples are the proposition to substantially rise the retirement age, the criticism on the environmental protection organizations and their use of Swiss “Verbandsbeschwerderecht”, the suggestion to revise the Swiss education system including much higher fees in academia or the proposal to replace the 26 Swiss cantons by a few so-called functional regions.

Shortly after the foundation of Avenir Suisse leftist forces tried to create an alternative think tank in order to

prevent a monopole of Avenir Suisse in the scientific discussion of political and societal issues. However, only in 2004 the foundation of the leftist think tank “Denknetz” was announced, initiated by representatives of academia, trade unions, NGOs, political parties and the media. Different to its liberal counterpart the “Denknetz” has to manage with much less financial resources and was until now not yet able to gain the same public attention as Avenir Suisse.

Beside these two mentioned rather broad ideological think tanks there are various other organizations affiliated to specific groups, institutions or ideological orientations.

Founded in 1979 and thus one of the oldest advocacy tanks in Switzerland is the liberal institute Switzerland (“Liberales Institut Schweiz”), which declares to distance itself from day-to-day politics. Its aim, however, which is the further development and dissemination of classical liberal ideas, clearly shows its ideological orientation.

The Gottlieb-Duttweiler-Institut (GDI) is named after the founder of the “Migros”, leader in Swiss retail trade. It describes as one of the oldest independent think tanks in Switzerland too, having its competencies in the fields of consumption, trade, economy and society.

Recently, a new trend of networking among think tanks can be observed. Together with Avenir Suisse the liberal institute Switzerland is the leading partner of the “Swiss Policy Network”, which aims at connecting the numerous think tanks in Switzerland and at integrating them into the international think tank community. In 2004 the Network was for the first time holding a fair of ideas (“Ideenmesse”), where numerous independent institutes and organizations, most having a more or less liberal focus, were participating. Again: at the leftist political spectrum a similar development cannot be observed yet.

Beside these “new” think tanks having emerged mainly during the last 30 years, Switzerland has a quite

strong tradition of political research and consulting in a more traditional way. In the process of policy formulation and policy making interest groups, first of all trade unions, and employers' associations (e.g. Swiss federation of trade unions, Central Union of Swiss Associations of Employers, *economiesuisse* (formerly Swiss Union of Commerce and Industry, *Vorort*), Swiss Associations of Bankers) have been playing a crucial role. Calling attention to important issues and providing information on their fields of action, they have been fulfilling a similar function as recently attributed to the "new" think tanks. Their success, however, often depends on their leading personalities. If they manage to have a credible leader representing the organizations' ideas last but not least with scientific arguments, their influence on policy making but also on the public discourse and opinion is considerable. An example is the Federation of Swiss Trade Unions and its chief economist Serge Gaillard, whose opinions and research results are often incorporated in the public political discussions. In addition to the pure "scientific experts" these personalities, thus, form a second group of "stakeholder experts", which are thought to be credible in spite of or even due to their ideological affiliation.

### **Summary: Features of Swiss think tanks**

The comments above have shown that the development of think tanks in Switzerland varies substantially from the Anglo-Saxon countries. While in the USA, for instance, the first generation of think tanks has been mainly privately financed and strongly oriented towards academic research aimed at influencing the political discourse and agenda (Weaver, 1989), this kind of think tank is a rather new phenomenon in Switzerland and less widespread than for example in the US, Germany or France. Rather, think tanks

in Switzerland have developed from the need of policy makers for scientific consulting in specific policy areas. As a result, think tanks in Switzerland differ from their Anglo-Saxon counterparts in several aspects. We mention the following:

First, only few can count on considerable financial resources. Most of them rely on income generated by their expertise and thus on their clients. Main customer of scientific research is the administration, which can lead to a relationship of dependence between think tanks and the government. Following Weaver and McGann (2000: p. 4), who see the autonomy from the government as a crucial characteristic of a think tank, this is not unproblematic.

Second, the difference between academic and non-academic think tanks is less clear in Switzerland than in other countries. On the one hand most university institutes need to generate receipts from mission oriented research projects in order to finance their research; on the other hand a considerable number of private research institutes are directed by academics. Serdült (2003) speaks of a “Swiss peculiarity” referring to these close (personal) linkages between university chairs and private research institutes. Generally speaking, think tanks in Switzerland seem to be more academic than for instance in the USA, where in addition to the academic think tanks a much more “journalistic” type of political consulting can be found.

Finally, there are two groups of experts in Switzerland, which can play a substantial role in the political process. In addition to purely “scientific experts” there are also some stakeholders that are considered to be credible. An example is the chief economist of the Federation of Swiss Trade Unions, whose opinions enjoy public attention in spite of the clear ideological affiliation.

## **Think Tanks – Possibilities and limits of influencing Policy Making**

### **A theoretical approach: Corporatism and vested interest**

In Germany the question of whether or not think tanks are substituting corporatist structures is discussed. For the Swiss case we first have to check to which degree the political system is characterized by such corporatist structures. Following the literature this is not that straightforward, since the classification of Switzerland in the discussion of corporatism largely depends on the definition chosen.

In their understanding of corporatism Katzenstein (1984) and Schmitter (1974) focus on institutional arrangements. In order to speak of a corporatist system, specific characteristics of the associations and of the decision making structures need to exist. In this perspective Switzerland differs in some important points from typical corporatist systems. Actually, the unions in Switzerland are rather weak; in the relation between labor and capital we thus find a superiority of the employers' organizations. Additionally, contrary to countries like Austria or Sweden there is no centralized tripartite authority responsible for macro-economic negotiations, but the wage bargaining is much decentralized. Finally, cooperation arrangements clearly have a sectoral character, which results from fragmentation and lacking state autonomy (Linder, 2005: p. 53, 304; Mach, 2004: p. 299; Kriesi, 1995: p. 349; Lijphart and Crepaz, 1991).

However, corporatism can also be understood as a particular mode of imparting interests ("Interessenvermittlung") (Schmidt, 1995: p. 520; Lehmbruch, 1977). If this more output oriented approach is chosen, policy making in Switzerland could be called corporatist referring to the central role of interest groups in the political process

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(Armingeon, 1997; Kriesi, 1995; Lehbruch, 1977). Kriesi (1995: p. 342) speaks in this context of some “functional structures equivalent to neo-corporatist arrangements” that exist in Switzerland.

In the context of this controversy we will abandon the notion of corporatism in the following, since the corporatist perspective is too abstract in order to use it as an analytical instrument for the Swiss Case (Mach, 2004: p. 298). Rather we will speak of the politics of vested interests (“*verbandsstaatliche Politik*”) or as Mach (2004: p. 297) calls it “public-private networks”.<sup>4</sup> We think this concept to be more appropriate to characterize the Swiss way of policy making, as it indeed focuses on the strong cooperation between para-state organizations and the state. This cooperation has its seeds in the economic crisis of the 1930s and the subsequent constitutional reform in 1947, when economic organizations got the right to participate in the legislative process and in the implementation of matters in their concerns (Linder, 2002: p. 129). Hence, different to most other industrialized countries the strong position of vested interests in Switzerland is consolidated by direct democracy, which turns para-state organizations into influential veto players and thus gives them a powerful instrument to add weight to their concerns.

To summarize, in Switzerland para-state and private actors gain substantial access to the process of policy making and implementation. Similar to the “corporatist thesis” it can therefore be expected that in this well structured “public-private network” (Mach, 2004: p. 297) think tanks find good conditions to influence the political process and its results in Switzerland.

In the following we will discuss the possibilities and limits of this influence in the Swiss political system. We start with an illustrative example of *Avenir Suisse* in the area of environmental policy before going into a more detailed analysis of think tanks’ role in general policy making. The market for think tanks is highly segmented. For further

research it would therefore be of importance to distinguish between different policy fields, in order to get a more sorrow picture of think tanks and their influence in specific areas.

**Example: The right to sue of environmental protection organizations (“Verbandsbeschwerderecht”) and the think tanks’ new function**

In Switzerland environmental protection organizations, after ten years of existence, get the right to sue against projects that significantly affect the environment. Introduced in the mid-1980s the legal empowerment of the environmental protection organizations to sue has been an issue of political debate for several years. Various parliamentary initiatives aimed to soften or even to abandon the instrument, since it was said to delay too many projects. As a consequence of these criticisms the Federal Office for the Environment, Forests and Landscape (OEFL) commissioned an evaluation of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” in 2000, which drew a very positive picture of the instrument.

After the publishing of this evaluation Avenir Suisse intervened in the debate by delivering its own publications on this topic, clearly guided by a liberal point of view and thus supporting the opponents of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” in the debate. In 2003 its book “Umweltschutz auf Abwegen – Wie Verbände ihr Beschwerderecht einsetzen” strongly criticized the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht“. Additionally, in 2004 Avenir Suisse published its own evaluation of the environmental organizations and their right to sue as a response to the BUWAL-evaluation, which the think tank accused for incorrect results tampering the political discussion. Avenir Suisse suggested in its study that the possibilities to sue for environmental organizations should be diminished in order

to ameliorate the economic but also the environmental efficiency of environmental policy (Avenir Suisse, 2004).

Against this background in December 2004 a bill for the revision of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” was circulated in the pre-parliamentary consultation process as response to one of the parliamentary initiatives that aimed at specifying the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” in order to prevent malpractice. While the representatives of the economy considered the bill to be not far-going enough, the leftist forces and the environmental protection organizations were clearly against any constriction of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” and understood the proposition as a weakening of the procedure. In June 2005 the committee for legal questions of the Council of the States (“Ständerat”) accepted the revision of the law (commission for legal questions of the Council of the States, 2005). The bill has recently entered the parliamentary process.

In this political debate on the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” Avenir Suisse and its study played a considerable role. In respect to its influence on the process of policy making the following points can be mentioned:

*1) Scientific arguments as instrument for legitimation:* The example clearly shows the possibility to legitimate political arguments by relying on scientific arguments.

First, as a consequence of the criticism by Avenir Suisse the administrations’ evaluation of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” of 2000 was revised. Even though this second study arrived at the same conclusions as the first one, these “revised” results were important for the administration in the contest of credibility with Avenir Suisse.

Furthermore, the arguments of Avenir Suisse were integrated in the consultation procedure on the reform-draft. As an example the statement of the Swiss Federation of



Road Traffic (“Schweizerischer Strassenverkehrsverband”, FRS) can be mentioned, in which Avenir Suisse’s results were used to prove the insufficiency of the reform-draft. By referring to the scientific study the FRS could endue its statement with the credibility that is important to be taken into account in the consultation process. On the other hand the eleven environmental organizations qualified to sue blamed Avenir Suisse for the weakening of environmental protection. They claimed the reform draft to be a result of the systematic pressure built up against the right to sue, which had been at least supported and guided by Avenir Suisse and its publication (VCS 2005).

2) *Scientific ideas and fragile consensus*: The studies of Avenir Suisse attracted considerable attention in the political discourse. Although the topic had been discussed on and off for several years, the publication fuelled the political discussion and – clearly supporting the liberal, right forces – was integrated in the arguments of the political actors. Following the publishing of the above mentioned book in 2003 several liberal parliamentarians interpellated the Federal Council concerning the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht” referring directly to Avenir Suisse and its arguments.<sup>5</sup> And, in November 2004 representatives of the Radicals (FDP) initiated a popular initiative that aims at substantially restricting the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht”.

This process can be well explained by means of the theoretical assumption that think tanks are of special importance in situations of fragile consensus (Sabatier 1991: pp.151-154). In 2004 the once found consensus was questioned, and there was sort of a stand-off between the political forces in respect to a possible revision of the “Verbandsbeschwerderecht”. Hence, Avenir Suisse by delivering arguments to one side, found good conditions to be heard. Moreover, the example shows that it is not only important for a think tank to be visible and credible enough

in order to influence the political debate, but also to hit the right moment for intervention. We can speak of a window of opportunity that was open in this precise situation and that allowed Avenir Suisse's arguments to gain in importance.

To conclude, Avenir Suisse and its studies cannot be neglected in the analysis of the reform-process of the "Verbandsbeschwerderecht". Although it is very difficult to estimate its factual influence, it was last but not least the reaction of the other actors involved that made the think tank an important actor in the pre-parliamentary process: either by using the scientific arguments in order to legitimate their own concerns, or by judging Avenir Suisse actions as important for the development of the process. Thus, we can at least speak of a considerable symbolic influence.

While the single case of the "Verbandsbeschwerderecht" does of course not allow generalizations, the example still shows that the Swiss political system offers different possibilities also for "new" think tanks to intervene in the process of policy making. In the following we will discuss these chances, but also the limits in a more general way.

### **Think tanks' influence on policy making in the Swiss political system**

According to Mach (2004: p. 290) interest groups have three main possibilities to influence policy making in the Swiss "public-private network": First, there is a collaboration with the administrations due to their role as provider of information. Second, interest groups are important actors in the pre-parliamentary process, during which they participate at various stages (commissions of experts, consulting procedure). Third, another means for

vested interests to influence policy making is indirectly through political parties. Consistent with our hypothesis we will show in the following that “new” think tanks in Switzerland can use to a large extent these same channels to influence policy making. Thereby we consider an important aspect shown by Freiburghaus/Zimmermann (1985: pp. 80f.): not all phases of the political process offer the same chances for scientific knowledge to become relevant.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the following comments focus on one level of policy making in Switzerland only. What is discussed for the different stages of the policy making process at the federal level, indeed finds similar patterns of influence at the cantonal and even communal level. Thus, it can be suggested that the federal structure of Switzerland even increases the influence of think tanks, because it generates multiple audiences for their information and analysis (Thunert, 2003: p. 35; Weiss, 1999: p. 292).

*Think tanks and the administration: the pre-parliamentary process*

The administration plays an important role in the development and in the planning and co-ordination of new policy programs (Linder 2005: p. 237). For these activities, professional know-how and expertise is of particular importance. It is therefore not surprising, that administrations, and particularly the federal administration, are the most prominent customers of academic research. A look at the publication list of private or university research institutes proves evidence for the administration’s substantial interest in analyses of specific topics and reform potentials. Furthermore, a most recent survey of the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) (2006: p.28) concludes that the employment of experts by the federal administration in the area of political consulting and

research amounts to 144 millions Swiss francs per year. In particular, the evaluation of federal programs' implementation and impact, and the formulation of reform propositions is a growing branch. In this field, think tanks are predestinated for playing an important role, since the involvement of external experts is a central element of an evaluation (see below, page 17f.). For the think tanks' potential influence this "entrance" for scientific research is important, as the administration is more and more a central actor in the policy making process.

The latter is particularly the case during the pre-parliamentary process of policy making, where the administration fulfills an important co-coordination function. The legislation process in Switzerland is substantially shaped by direct democracy. Due to the possibility to claim a referendum against a parliamentary decision, the most important interest groups, parties or even cantons have a powerful veto-position. This led to the establishment of an extensive pre-parliamentary process, which aims at finding a compromise among all important actors. As a consequence, in the pre-parliamentary process a great variety of actors have generally the possibility to bring in their ideas and concerns. This stage of policy making consists of two elements. In the so-called extra-parliamentary commissions ("Expertenkommissionen") experts and concerned actors in a specific topic are invited to elaborate a draft bill. This draft is afterwards circulated in a consultation process ("Vernehmlassungsverfahren"), in which the most important political actors like the parties, the interest groups, the cantons, and further involved circles are asked for a statement. It is only after these two steps that the Federal Council makes its proposition to the parliament.

In this pre-parliamentary process the possibilities for think tanks to influence the political process can be found at two levels. First, think tanks can provide

information to the political actors participating in the process. At this stage of policy formulation the quality of the arguments is very important (Gerheuser et al., 1996). If a party, an interest group, but also governmental departments want their concerns to be heard, it is necessary that their statements are well formulated and – even better – scientifically founded. Thus, potential customers for think tanks' know-how are numerous. Indeed the number of scientific studies at this stage is quite large.

Second, think tanks can themselves act as a political actor. Due to their know-how in a certain field prominent members of think tanks are, on the one hand, often named as experts in the extra-parliamentary commissions and can thus influence the direction of the discourse at an early stage. On the other hand, they can use the consultation process for their own statements. Known experts in a certain field are often invited to participate in the consultation process. And, compared to political parties or the cantons with often very limited resources and knowledge, their opinions will be well founded and elaborated and therefore have a chance to be taken into account.

As to the think tanks' influence on policy-making, this first part of the political process is important. Following Freiburghaus and Zimmermann (1984: pp. 88f.) the pre-parliamentary process is a period of latency ("Latenzphase"), which means that different alternatives for a policy are still discussed and the opinions are not made yet. Such periods are convenient for scientific arguments as the openness of the situation corresponds well to the explorative character of scientific research. But not only that the possibilities for think tanks to bring in their ideas are best, it is also at this stage that the possibility of change is highest, and the substantial thematic decisions are finally taken (Kriesi, 1995: p. 175; Freiburghaus and Zimmermann, 1985: pp. 87ff., p. 250).

The significance of political consulting in the arena

of the administration is broadly accepted, but not always appreciated. Lendi (2005: p. 141, p. 222) criticizes that the knowledge exchange between research and the administration is often rather intransparent and leads to a power displacement. Not only that the commission of scientific studies is often sparsely transparent, but the administration is also free on how to use the new information. They can provide the knowledge to the other actors and the public, but due to strategic reasons they also may hold it back or bring it in only partially. Thus, the administration not only gains additional know-how from scientific research, but also sort of extra power.

*Think tanks in the context of the parliamentary process*

In the parliamentary process the influence of think tanks must be estimated as much more limited. Following Freiburghaus and Zimmermann (1985: pp. 91f., p. 250) it is a period of concordance (“Konkordanzphase”), during which politics and not science defines the rules of the game. Although it would be possible that the political parties use scientific knowledge and arguments for additional legitimation or credibility, this happens quite rarely.<sup>6</sup> It is the parliamentary phase of the decision making process when the quarrel between ideological opinions and beliefs take centre stage. While scientific arguments supporting an ideological orientation may strengthen the cohesion among the members of parliament with the same affiliation, they won’t be of much help to convince people with another ideological background.

However, certain connections to scientifically based arguments exist. This happens for example through personal linkages between the parliament and research institutes. An example is the “organization for environ-

ment-conflict-management Econcept”, which is active in the field of environmental policy and which a member of parliament of the social democratic party is affiliated to as managing partner. Additionally, studies of the parliamentary controlling committees (“Geschäftsprüfungskommission” (GPK), “parlamentarische Verwaltungskontrolle (PVK)), which often contain external scientific analyses and particularly evaluations, have lately gained in importance in the parliamentary process.

#### *Think tanks and policy evaluation*

The latter aspect reveals another important – maybe central – field of activity for think tanks in Switzerland which is policy evaluation. Evaluation can be seen as the last part of the policy cycle, in which the implementation and effectiveness of political measures is evaluated (Linder, 2005). Ideally, evaluation results in learning effects for further policy making and can therefore influence both the pre-parliamentary, but also the parliamentary process. Recently, the demand for evaluation has even been institutionalized. Following Article 170 of the Swiss constitution, political measures and instruments have to be evaluated for effectiveness. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of contract research institutes are active in the field of policy evaluation, where they can give important inputs for further policy making.

#### *Think tanks in the public discourse*

In the public discourse the influence of think tanks is twofold. First, scientific concepts and arguments can be used to steer the political campaign, and, second, think

tanks can play a role for the agenda setting in the political arena.

Different to the parliamentary process political parties are quite interested in political consulting if it comes to popular votations. A substantial number of consulting firms offer their services in the area of campaigning at the national, but also at the cantonal and communal level. The proposition that this consulting is indeed based on “scientific” arguments can be challenged, but campaigning and consulting has definitely become a highly professionalized business, and in Switzerland it finds its market not only for elections, but also for the votations of direct democracy.

With regard to popular votations, two aspects are important concerning think tanks’ potential influence. One, we find pre-polls done by think tanks. Mass media use them as infotainment, while interest groups want to get informed about their chances to win the campaign or to evaluate the effects of particular arguments. While it is controversial whether and how opinion polls previous to votations influence the final result (e.g. Kirchgässner, 1986), it can also be problematic that potential political actors organize their “own” confidential pre-polls that are never published (Linder, 2003).

Two, survey analyses after votations and elections are quite popular in Switzerland, and create linkages between scientific research and politics. These surveys are closely connected to the “Swiss Association for Empirical Social Research” (gfs) and its research institutes. However, the surveys are to a large extent financed by (economic) interest groups that hope to bring decisive arguments into the public debate. As a consequence, the inputs generated by such analyses are rather uncontrollable and intransparent. Even if at this stage of policy-making the work of research institutes is maybe the most visible, think tanks cannot have an intentional, substantial influence in the



votation.

According to Weiss (1999: p.296) the mass media play an increasing role in the policy making process by determining the public discourse. Among others media are the ideal circulator of think tanks know-how, as they help calling attention and setting the agenda for issues that are probably not subject to a debate yet. The media are an efficient channel to reach not only the public, but also the political actors.

In Switzerland it is only recently, that “new“ think tanks engage in the political process at the stage of agenda setting. Actually, it is mainly Avenir Suisse that every now and then introduces its often provocative ideas to the public discussion. Being intensely discussed in the media, Avenir Suisse’s propositions regularly gain considerable attention among the public and politicians. Even though the propositions are generally too far going to be implemented, they still give an impulse by thinking the unthinkable. This is agenda setting, influencing policy making in an indirect way.

### **The structural context for think tanks’ influence in policy making – a summary**

In the international discussion of the potential influence of think tanks on the political process and its result, several institutional and cultural elements are mentioned, which determine the position of think tanks in the political system and thus the possibilities and limits of their influence (Thunert, 1999: pp. 35f.; Weaver, 1999: pp. 285f.; Weiss, 1999: pp. 292ff.; Gellner, 1995: pp.46-61). The comments above have shown that this is also true for think tanks in Switzerland. To summarize the following points can be pointed out:

*Openness of the pre-parliamentary process and federalism*

The political system in Switzerland offers numerous channels for external scientific know-how and ideas to enter the political discourse. It is first of all direct democracy that shapes the process of policy making and gives strong interest groups and experts an important voice. Hence, compared to typical corporatist systems the openness for scientific arguments is even more ample since not only specific groups like employers' and employees' organizations, but a large number of actors are involved in the political process. Therefore, it can be expected that "new" think tanks in Switzerland do not necessarily rely on the often mentioned crisis of interest groups due to growing liberalization and internationalization (Mach, 2004: p. 305), but that they can bring in their ideas simultaneously using the channels of the pre-parliamentary process and direct democracy. The great number of actors involved in the political process has, however, its disadvantages too: Think tanks' ideas and know-how have to compete with the opinions and concerns of numerous other actors. Thus, for the effective influence of think tanks the question comes up to what extent their inputs really make an impact.

Something similar can be said concerning the federal structure of Switzerland, which according to the literature (Thunert, 2003: p. 35; Weiss, 1999: p. 292) promotes the influence of think tanks, because it generates multiple audiences for their information and analysis. Cantons and communes are indeed important clients of mission oriented research institutes in Switzerland buying their own expertise for their own projects. Hence, the inherently large demand of scientific know-how in the Swiss political system is multiplied by the federal structure. However, this is basically true for big cantons and cities

disposing of enough resources to finance their own research. Small cantons on the other hand often lack resources for substantive research assignments, which in reality relativizes the effect of decentralized structures on think tanks influence.

### *Imbalance between Right and Left*

According to Kriesi (1982: 155) the associations and interest groups play a decisive role in the Swiss decision making process, first of all in the area of economic and social policy. The influence is however not equal among Left and Right. Although they both belong to the “core actors” in a decision making process, the representatives of the employers’ organizations are much more numerous than those of the unions.

It shows that the “new” think tanks cannot change the situation. As mentioned above there is the same imbalance between the “new” leftist and right advocacy tanks concerning financial resources and public attention as it is the case for the traditional economic interest groups. It is almost exclusively Avenir Suisse that is present in the political and public discussions, while corresponding leftist proposition much less find their way to public attention.

### *Growing complexity, public discourse and direct democracy*

The growing range and complexity of public action requires a high level of information and knowledge of the policy-makers. The government has different possibilities to get this information. In addition to a more substantial integration of political actors in the parliamentary and pre-parliamentary process or the creating of task-specific

consulting-committees the government can indent professional experts like university institutes, research institutes, or individual experts for particular studies (Linder, 1977: 15f.).

As political decisions in Switzerland regularly depend on referenda, not only the government, but also the people need to be informed about a new policy. Since the subjects of popular votations are more and more complex, it is an important task to transform the scientific and political discussion into pro and contras comprehensible for the people. In this process of knowledge transfer the media play an important role (Gellner, 1995, pp. 29ff.). During political campaigns scientific arguments or the academic themselves are used on both the supporters' and the opponents' side to enforce their opinions. On the other hand this arena offers good possibilities to think tanks to become active and to set the agenda by pointing at specific issues and problems (Freiburghaus and Zimmermann, 1985: p.81).

*The new function: agenda setting*

A new aspect of think tanks' activities in Switzerland is indeed the element of putting new ideas and propositions on the political agenda. While the socio-economic think tanks, that is the unions and employers' associations, also tried to influence the political agenda, the first generation of "new" think tanks in Switzerland has not been playing a substantial role at this early stage of policy formulation. It is only with the emergence of Avenir Suisse, that a think tank consciously started to influence the political agenda by pointing to prevalent issues and problems. This again, is a difference to the Anglo-Saxon situation, where exactly this type of think tanks, mainly

privately funded with a strong commitment to academic research, aimed at influencing the political discourse and agenda rather than contributing to short-term policy enactment and evaluation, first occurred (Weaver, 1999: 269).

For Switzerland this agenda setting function means a new dimension of think tanks' influence. It is especially at this early stage, when the political arena is open to external inputs and when even "the unthinkable" (Cockett, 1994) is discussed, that the political debate can be steered. However, until now Avenir Suisse is still the exception being the only think tank that tries and is capable to reach the public at all levels of the public debate. It remains to be seen whether Avenir Suisse continues to be a single case or whether others will be able to play a comparable role in the future. Another aspect in this context is that there are of course "gatekeepers" trying to influence the access of these scientific inputs. However, we did not find any scientific studies dealing with this question, which will therefore be a topic for further research.

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis shows that the typology of Thunert (1999) is useful also for the Swiss case: we can distinguish "academic" and "advocacy" think tanks as well as "mission oriented" research institutes. Academic think tanks are the oldest and most prominent type among the "new" generation of think tanks. While the mission oriented institutes have established in the political landscape at all federal levels and seem to be more academic than for instance in the US, advocacy think tanks are a rare and recent phenomenon. However, the typology following the Anglo-Saxon literature has to be somewhat redefined for the Swiss case:

First, the distinction between academic and non-

academic think tanks is not that straightforward. Almost all Swiss think tanks have a more or less direct link to academia, be it through an institutional affiliation or through personal linkages. Generally, the academic founding is important in Switzerland, as it determines to a great extent the credibility of think tanks propositions and interventions.

Second, we find a particular category of “old” think tanks that do not fit into the Anglo-Saxon oriented typology, but rather correspond to a corporatist way of policy making in the sense of imparting interests (Schmidt, 1995: p. 520; Lehmbbruch, 1977). In the Swiss political system, employers’ and employees’ association have been playing an important role in knowledge transfer for a long time. Their information and knowledge from professional experience have often built the basis for policy formulation and development. In this sense, they can be referred to as a fourth traditional category of think tanks. For think tanks’ actual influence in Swiss policy making these “old” think tanks have been of crucial importance. First of all due to direct democracy these para-state and private organizations have been having an important position in the political system since an early stage of the Swiss federal state, which led to the implementation of well structured relations between the state and the vested interests. Today these channels can also be used by the “new” think tanks giving them various possibilities to bring their propositions and ideas to the political process. To sum up think tanks’ influence can be characterized as follows:

- The influence of new as well as of old think tanks varies considerably depending on the stage of the political process. The most important moment to bring in their propositions and ideas is the pre-parliamentary process, when the opinions on a specific issue can still be formed and the political discourse can be influenced. Scientific know-how is by far less important in the parliamentary process, when ideological beliefs play the most important

role and opinions on a topic are made.

- The recent amendment of the Swiss constitution demanding evaluation of all federal policies gives “new” think tanks a good and even institutionalized instrument to bring external knowledge into the political process and – in the ideal case – to influence future policy making.
- A rather new function of think tanks in Switzerland is agenda setting, which was only introduced by Avenir Suisse. It means last but not least the production of studies that are detached from the feasible.
- The landscape of advocacy think tanks in Switzerland is characterized by an imbalance between leftist and right forces. While the liberal think tanks for instance use new possibilities of influence by means of agenda setting, leftist ideas are much less visible at this important early stage of policy formulation. Generally speaking, these developments show a similar pattern as the relationship between the employers’ and employees’ organizations traditionally shaped by a predominance of the liberal employers’ forces.

Concerning the relationship between vested interests and think tanks one cannot speak of a recalibration of policy making. In the parliamentary process, it is still the vested interests that are central. At this stage ideological beliefs and affiliations are of importance, while scientific arguments are often not of much help. However, the early period of policy formulation, when the positions of the different political actors are not specified yet, and when the political arena is open for different propositions and ideas, think tanks have their chance. They can play an important role in the agenda setting and influence the political discourse. Their arguments can also be used by vested interests in order to push their own concerns. Hence, the “new” think tanks are not replacing the interest groups, but “new” think tanks and vested interests rather complement each other.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The difference between interest groups/vested interests on the one hand and the socio-economic or “old” think tanks has to be clarified. The latter can be seen as a sub-category of the first. Thus, the term “old think tanks” in particular refers to the economic interest groups like the unions and the employers’ associations which in 1947 got the right to participate in the legislative process and in the implementation of matters in their concerns (Linder, 2002: p. 129). In contrast

<sup>2</sup> It should however be mentioned that think tanks engaging in organizational management and reconstruction, like for instance Price Waterhouse Coopers, sometimes also touch policy-aspects. The extreme example is the small commune Mühledorf, which sourced out the communal administration to a private consulting institute.

<sup>3</sup> Internal administrative institutes are not considered as a think tank and won’t be discussed here. It can be mentioned, however, that also this kind of political consulting by experts has a quite strong tradition in Switzerland. An important institute is the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SWTR) which has been an important advisory body of the Federal Council for several decades.

<sup>4</sup> Various studies deal with such “public-private networks” in order to explain policy outcome or policy change in Switzerland. While for instance Kriesi and Jegen (2001) as well as Sciarini et al. (2004) focus on networks in the sense of actor constellations in the field of Swiss energy policy and Europeanization respectively, Kübler (2001) uses the advocacy coalition approach to explain change in Swiss drug policy.

<sup>5</sup> Examples: Interpellation Leutenegger 2004, simple question Zuppiger 2004.

<sup>6</sup> A look at the homepages of “Büro BASS”, “Büro Vatter, Politikforschung & -beratung”, “Infras”, and “Interface” show that political parties are not the main customers of the research institutes. If they place an order with a scientific study it concerns elections or votations rather than thematic questions.



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