



Russian Journal

# STANDPOINT of the WEEK:

---

## Think Tanks: The Battle of Progressive Manifestos

weekly edition of the Russian Institute

issue #3(59)  
April 27, 2011

### *John Gray:* **THE DECLINE OF THE THINK TANK'S ERA**

*RJ* The twentieth century was marked by the rise in number of various think tanks. What can account for this?



John Gray

In most western countries, the era of the think tank started in the early seventies and ended in the nineties. **Though mainstream parties continue to use them, think tanks are definitely not as influential as they have been in the past.** Governments have created their own internal think tanks (such as Lord Rothschild's Central Policy Review staff from 1971-74, and the various think tanks that were created within Blair's administrations). These internal governmental think tanks have become more important, though they are rarely decisive in policy-formation. Attempts by think tanks to reinvent themselves as marketing companies have generally been unsuccessful.

Exclusive for this issue, RJ spoke with the famous British public figure and anti-humanist philosopher, *John Gray*, about the idea of progress and the nature of think-tanks.

**In Britain, the think tank came into prominence as a result of unresolved economic conflicts and government failures.** The free-market Institute of Economic Affairs was founded not long after WWII exactly for that purpose, but only gained political leverage in the mid-to-late seventies when neither Labour nor the existing Conservative party was able to deal with large-scale industrial decline and the excessive power of trade unions. After Thatcher grappled with these problems, the IEA declined in influence and is now politically marginal once again.

*To be continued p. 3*

#### DIXI

■ John Gray . . . . . p.1,3

#### Matter of the fact

■ Alexey Chadaev . . . . . p.2

#### Problematic field

■ Sergey Belanovsky . . . . p.4-5

■ Samuel Charap . . . . . p.5

■ Viktor Vakhstein . . . . . p.6

■ Boris Mezhev . . . . . p.7

■ John McGowan . . . . . p.8-9

■ Vyacheslav Glazychev . . . p.9

#### Progress and Think Tanks

■ James McGann . . . . . p.10-12

■ John Halpin . . . . . p.12

■ Michael Parenti . . . . . p.14

■ Alexander Cockburn . . . p.15

■ Henry William Brands . . p.15

#### Trends

■ Dmitry Petrov . . . . . p.16-17

#### Position

■ Vladislav Inozemtsev p.18-19

#### Returning back

■ Alexander Svarants . . . . p.20

*Editor in Chief*  
Gleb Pavlovsky

*Editorial Director*  
Alexander Pavlov

*Editorial Office:*  
M. Gnezdnikovsky per., 9/8, str. 3a  
Moscow, 125009  
Phone: (495) 629-8993  
Fax: (495) 629-5297  
e-mail: info@russ.ru

# THE DECLINE OF THE THINK TANK'S ERA

---

John Gray

---

Continuing. For beginning see p. 1

**RJ** Do think tanks develop manifests and radical political reforms? Or is their activity confined to analytic functions, with political manifests remaining a task for political parties?

**All the think tanks in Britain and the US are heavily politicized and all of them claim to be progressive.** Political parties use think tanks as sources of policy and benchmarks of prevailing ideas. With few exceptions, **the majority of think tanks continue to subscribe to versions of the neoliberal economic consensus** that underpinned the political success of western right-wing parties in the eighties. The world has changed radically since that time, but the prevailing ideology remains the same. For this reason, **progressive think tanks and the parties that use them now embody a type of conservatism.**

**RJ** Could the think tanks of today be called drivers of progress?



In present circumstances there are many reasons for skepticism about the idea of progress in ethics and politics. Nevertheless, these reasons will not stop parties and governments from claiming to be progressive. **The power of the idea of progress at the present time comes not from any positive qualities the idea may have but from an inability to function without it. There is no rival myth, so the notion of progress remains useful to governments even though it is no longer credible.**

**RJ** How would you evaluate Obama's 'progressivism' since being elected president? Who among the outstanding politicians of the present would you consider progressive?

Obama is a highly intelligent but stereotypical American corporate liberal with no new ideas or policies. The irony of his situation comes from the fact that America's problems are deeply rooted and intractable, so progress as he understands it is not achievable. In political terms, America's future may lie with movements such as the Tea Party, which aim to achieve progress by returning to an imaginary past. Alternatively, the Republicans may be so ideologically divided as to be unable to settle on a presidential candidate that can command broad support, and in that case Obama may be re-elected by default. Which of these situations will unfold cannot at present be determined. ■

*Yulia Netesova exclusively for RJ*

**John Gray** (born 1948) is a British philosopher, and former professor at Oxford, Harvard, and Yale. He retired from academic life in 2008 as professor of European thought at the London School of Economics. Gray contributes regularly to *The Guardian*, and *New Statesman*, and has written several books on political theory, including *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2003).

John Gray is known for his strong criticisms of neoliberalism, the global free market, and many of the central currents of Western thought, such as humanism.

In his books and articles, Gray mercilessly attacks the modern myth of humanism, interpreting it as a post-Christian chimera foreshadowing an inevitable failure of the Utopian proj-

ects of elites who have been captivated by a new, secular promise of redemption that can be achieved through technologic and scientific progress. He argues that humanism does not confine a human being to his/her biological nature, and that all mass modern ideologies – such as communism, fascism, and 'global market capitalism' – lead to unnecessary suffering due to their inherent belief that a human's behaviour can be regulated by social mechanisms.

