

# THINK-TANKS ARE NOT GOING TO HELP PROGRESSIVISM

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**T**hink-tanks have become very politicized over the past forty years. **On the whole, there are much more and much better funded**

**think-tanks on the right than on the left. This is because conservatives have found them a useful way to further their political agenda.** Rich conservatives can make tax-free donations to think-tanks – and not only avoid paying taxes, but also avoid having to deal with universities that have an educational mission and are less able to be so ideologically driven. There has been some effort to create 'progressive' think-tanks in a similar fashion to those of the conservatives, but there is still a real imbalance.

I think progress can be judged comparatively, in relation to whether today is better than yesterday. By that measure, the US is perhaps worse off in 2011 than it was in 1971 if you take as your measure social and economic equality. And, in my view, that is what defines a 'progressive': someone who believes that the benefits of prosperity should be as equally distributed as possible, and who believes there is a minimum level of education, health care, and economic security that should be provided for every citizen. **Conservatives (or neoliberals) in today's world are those who are working to roll back the progress made in the rich democracies during the 20th century toward providing those basic rights to all.**

Real progress was made between 1920 and 1970 toward equality (more so in Western Europe than in the US, but real progress in both places nonetheless), but progressives since then have been on the defensive, fighting hard to keep their gains from being eroded away. Progressives are currently

losing this battle (again, more so in the US than in Western Europe).

Every politician (even the conservative) promises that his party will improve upon current conditions. Where parties differ is in what they identify as wrong in the status quo and what they believe as necessary action to correct that wrong. Parties needn't disagree about both of these things, but political debates usually focus on one of the two (at least). **Progressives have been losing the political battle in the US over the past forty years because they have been unable to convince the majority that persistent and growing inequality is the primary ill of contemporary American society.** Instead, conservatives have succeeded in getting voters more concerned with issues of national security, immigration, taxes, and government spending/regulation. But both parties look to make progress and to improve current conditions.

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Given my ideal definition of a progressive as someone committed to equality, **the current President of the US, Barack Obama, has no doubt been a disappointment.** But he lives in the real world of politics and it is hard to know if he could have accomplished much more in his first six months in office (when his party enjoyed large majorities in both houses of Congress). Getting health care legislation passed was a major victory, and there were some minor victories in relation to student loans, pay discrimination against women, and

(more recently) ending the absurd military policy concerning homosexuals.

But Obama's human rights record is abysmal – and that is where he has a pretty clear field to act, and does not require Congressional action to change Bush-era policies that he has instead chosen to continue. And his eagerness for compromise (baffling as a response to virulent Republican hostility) means that he has accepted 'deals' on extending the Bush era tax cuts and the federal budget that are deeply anti-progressive.

The real disappointment is that this president, who was praised so highly for his rhetorical skills, has done little to nothing for articulating a progressive vision. He had a golden opportunity with the financial crisis to educate Americans about the ways in which the nation's wealth is being appropriated by the very, very rich. **But he seems more beholden to Wall Street (and the big campaign donors) than to average citizens, a point brought home by the very weak financial regulation bill that Congress passed, as well as by Obama's refusal to go to the public with criticisms against the banks.**

If progressives have been losing in American politics for the past forty years, it is partly because they have failed to present a compelling and attractive vision of what they stand for and why. Obama's book, *The Audacity of Hope*, actually provides a pretty good version of that vision. It has therefore been puzzling – and deeply disappointing – that he hasn't used his current position to expand upon this progressive position. You have to go to Bernie Sanders in the US Senate or Barney Frank in the US House to find a truly progressive voice among current American politicians.

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The problem in the US is not politicized think-tanks but the disappearance of a truly independent press (one that can evaluate the statements made by think-tanks and other political actors, not just report what they say) along with a withered public sphere in which money crowds out all other voices. Public speech is not free in the US – and thus the wealthy get to set the national agenda. Political speech is a good thing in a democracy, just as political disagreements are inevitable. But when some viewpoints never get a fair chance to express themselves, democracy is only a shadow of what it should be. **The problem in the US is that we neither have the full, open debate, nor a system that allows the winning party to actually do something. The veto points in American governance have instead given us a state of political gridlock. ■**

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## DON'T SOLVE BY THEMSELVES



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A wave of reports, which are now being produced by various expert groups, is a reaction to the direct signal from those in power, who have suddenly become interested in what the intellectuals are thinking. This development in and of itself is something good.

The demand for an expert opinion on the part of authorities is, in part, an outcome of the confusion – perplexity among the ruling class, who are gradually becoming aware of the fact that things may not be as good as they otherwise seem. There is also, to be sure, an element of PR in these attempts of the authorities to convey a message, through the expert community, that the ruling class is not altogether indifferent to public opinion.

It would be a mistake to assume that this practice of offering advice to state authorities via publications is endemic to Russia. In fact, the very same system is also widely in place in the West. But over there across the ocean, this job is usually carried out directly by full-time think-tanks that are commissioned by the state. **In Russia, on the contrary the old Soviet-style tradition of providing friendly help in the resolution of common problems still prevails.** As a result, I

believe that Western-style think tanks will not come to play an instrumental role in social and political life any time soon. Indeed, many of the things that will be proposed by these expert groups as an alternative to the existing policy decision-making practices, are unlikely to be easily accepted by the political elites. Thus, I am dubious that this current practice will persevere.

Among the many signs pointing to the latter eventuality, there is the fact that **none of the reports produced so far has met with the approval of the broader Russian society.** They have been and are still viewed as a sort of non-essential activity. Both the people compiling the reports and those who are supposed to read them and implement the ideas contained therein are engaged with a million other tasks. That is why we have yet to read *a full-fledged report* – full-fledged in the sense that it meets the requirements that are generally applicable in the West. As of now, we have only some abstracts, the reaction to which has yet to be assessed. Nonetheless, this process is still far more adequate than the activities taken by some insulated groups of 'internal experts', which dare to solve all problems by themselves. ■