

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACKWARDS



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Exclusively for RJ

Think-tanks emerged and arose in the XX-th century, out of a belief that reason and intelligence could solve all the problems of society. They proliferated during the Cold War as a way to prevent nuclear war and to suggest ways forward in the face of the otherwise intractable struggle between Western democracy and East-bloc communism.

Early think-tanks were fairly moderate. Their tasks did not include political manifests and radical political reforms. Back then, their activities were confined to analytic functions, while political manifests were up to political platforms. They produced ‘white papers’ rather than manifestos. They focused on the *possible* rather than the *ideal*. However, they have grown much more politicized during the last forty years and have become more the creatures of the two major political parties than they

were before.

Since think-tanks have polarized, their attitudes to progress vary considerably. Some of them even think that the progressive movement has long since been dead. But progressivism is alive in America; witness Obama’s health care reform. But it is also struggling. The US has steadily grown more conservative from Reagan to Obama; there seems to be a bit of a shift back, but the looming federal deficit has made progressive programs much harder to fund. How can we evaluate Obama’s progressivism regarding the results of the years he has spent in power? It is easy. **Obama’s progressivism is of the pragmatic variety: take what you can get, and hope to get a bit more later.** At the moment he is handcuffed by the deficit and will have difficulty simply holding onto what he has achieved. ■

THINKING ONLY ABOUT THEIR SPONSORS



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The rise of think-tanks in America is to a certain extent a function of the nation’s tax laws — rich people can avoid taxes by setting up so-called ‘non-profits’ and donating money to them. Functionally, **think-tanks are enterprises devoted to the outflanking and suppression of the kind of independent and free thought that is theoretically pursued in a university.** A think-tank by definition limits its thoughts to those set out by its financial sponsors. Thus, the Brookings Institution in Washington will advance ideas congenial to Democrats, and the Cato Institute will advance views congenial to corporations who resent all government intervention or regulation.

A think-tank certainly should not advance manifests. If it is to be something useful as opposed to a mechanism for political lobbying, a think-tank should genuinely ‘think’ and advance ideas. This was the original purpose of the Central Policy Research Unit in the UK back in the late 60s, which was attached to the

prime minister’s office and designed to supply ideas from outside the purview of the established bureaucracy.

The skepticism towards think-tanks is justified since they are now no more than marketing firms, working on contracts rather than dealing in expert knowledge.

As for the idea of ‘progress’ and its connection with think-tanks, it can still be rehabilitated. It survives at least in such outfits as the Roosevelt Institute, which looks back to the ideals of the New Deal period in the 1930s. By and large, however, the idea of progress has been virtually extinguished by the onset of neoliberalism.

Many people think that Barack Obama’s politics can be called progressive. But there is no detectable ‘progressivism’ in the brain or bosom of Barack Obama. Progressive politicians? There are some, and I would point to Dennis Kucinich in the House, and Bernie Sanders in the Senate as two good examples of politicians who are actually progressive. ■