

Intellectual substance abuse

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OPINION

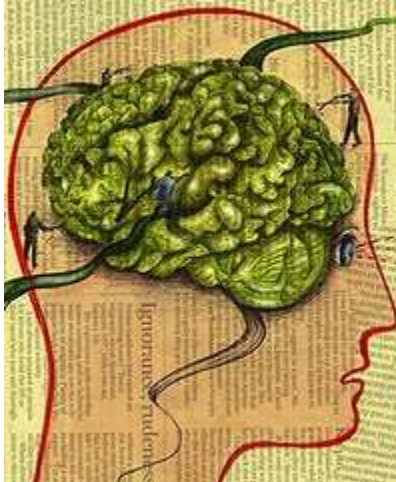


Illustration: Kerrie Leishman

Open-ended thinking is being undermined by the noisy demands of advocacy.

There has been a lot of discussion of what the Occupy movement stands for, or perhaps now stood for, and whether it is like the US Tea Party movement. On a trip to the US in October I spent maybe an hour together talking to whoever would talk to me at Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Washington DC. Here I formed the view that the resemblance is striking. But my slipshod sample swore blind they had nothing in common. Their distinction was clearly capitalised: they are Left while the Tea Party is Right and this seemingly simple fact overrides any commonality.

I say "seemingly simple" because I made an earth-shattering discovery a little while ago: both the right and the left care about creating a healthier, happier, more prosperous society. An economist of my acquaintance, who had the misfortune to find himself on the right after a promising career start as a Marxist, once even admitted (in a moment of weakness, no doubt) that he entered the profession to study how people could be best served. His alignment, he claimed, had moved along with his honest opinion of what type of economic management would allow for the best outcomes.

Despite the accusations hurled at each other by ideological opponents, my contact with both so-called "left" and "right" has convinced me that in general the two sides share common goals while disagreeing only on implementation. Perhaps it is time for each side to stop dismissing the other as shadily-funded stooges and use the intellectual rigour in their opposites as a whetting stone for their own ideas.

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There has been a valiant defence mounted of the discombobulated demands of the Occupiers. But their lack of coherent demands is beyond defending in the eyes of most non-occupados. It

discredits the movement. Even "grassroots" activism needs to be underpinned by clear and consistent thinking.

This is where think tanks come into their own.

Think tanks are proliferating. Two thirds of all think tanks around the world were founded in the past 40 years. And more are created every year. Think tanks are established to independently develop public policy according to a guiding ideology or to support public policy along partisan lines.

Even in the latter case they perform an important function in public discourse: they think slowly and rigorously away from the media cycle. They provide the friendly nursery environment in which the seed of an idea can be nurtured, grown and pruned into shape. They are more important than ever in the age of Twitter, as their research and long-form think pieces add a counterweight to the increasingly bilious opinion cycle.

But our think tanks are failing in one key area: their ideas are not leaving home.

That is not to say they are not being represented in the media. In a content-hungry world, research papers are reduced to opinion pieces, the people to talking heads. And everyone yap-yap-yaps away on the ABC's *Q&A* as the tweets whoosh by. Two minutes to describe your position on a complex topic - make it funny! - a dig at your ideological opponent, a crucifixion on the web and a "discussion has been had".

It is charming to have one's opinions flattered and confirmation bias is everything in sound-bite media. But to really get the ideas out of the nursery, they have to be placed in the ring to duke it out with their equals. Or perhaps, if you're a Sartre fan, in a small locked room - "hell is other people's ideas". Think tanks should be like rival siblings, or cousin religions. The US think tank scene has perfect conditions for this type of sparring. Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution in Washington compares the concentration of think tanks along DC's Massachusetts Avenue to the clustering of technology companies in Silicon Valley.

The proximity of think tanks to one another encourages interactions between thinkers from different tanks - the director of the libertarian Cato Institute happily narrates a recent argument he had with his counterpart at the leftish Brookings Institution. Arguments continue after hours for the fun of it. This is an important factor in the proofing of ideas: because it is only through a process of rigorous and prolonged argument - with people not sympathetic to your ideological bent - that ideas are refined and matured. Or, sometimes, revealed to be riddled with flaws. Whichever it is, it's a valuable process.

A necessary complement to the discipline of the think tank is the communications talent of the activist, or advocate. Advocacy is the skill of translating ideas into lay speak and catalysing action. GetUp! are quintessential advocates.

They do not develop ideas, they process and refine them into ideas hors d'oeuvres - morsels that are quick to swallow and easy to act upon, at least symbolically. This is effective folk mobilisation. Nobody, least of all GetUp! themselves, expects advocates to engage in real debate on the issues.

The trouble is, in Australia advocacy is often confused with public debate, and the advocate with the public intellectual. It can be difficult to find the line where energetically defended reasoning spills into dogma. I would argue that the difference between debate and advocacy is the depth and flexibility of thought of the conversants and the "stakes" of the debate - real debaters put their opinions and positions on the line, a modification is possible.

Where an advocate exists to simplify a message enough to have it heard and remembered, we should expect an intellectual to respond thoughtfully - off "message" and on topic. Flexibility of thought generally results in a non-adherence to ideology, as the thinker finds gaps in utility, morality, economics or practicality as they apply to an inconsistent world.

This role confusion is affecting the make-up of think tanks. Often scantily resourced not-for-profits, the think tanks market themselves to funders through media visibility. So, the media demand for a mainline of talking heads is causing a skew to showmen at the expense of the thinkers. Some of history's great thinkers have also been great showmen - the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman is one that springs to mind - but many are not, and, in the choice between a decent mind with good presentation skills and a great mind with none, I know which I'd rather have proposing and examining the tools of public policy. And by all means then an advocate and an activist to PowerPoint up their findings and engage grassroots support.

When think tanks become stacked with advocates, they become cultish, shying away from real debate, their acolytes careful not to engage in controversial territory where the logic or practicality of the ideology might be called into question. Hectoring each other via the media is an effective way to appear to debate while keeping the stakes low. Our most popular media formats support this strategy - brevity of format usually precludes real engagement on TV.

But genuine engagement is about to become more important in Australia. More action-oriented organisations can be expected to arrive before too long. In addition to GetUp!, there will be groups with a libertarian to conservative bent - already small groups have been springing up to support Coalition policies or protest against increasingly restrictive lifestyle engineering policies from both sides of politics.

With a flourishing advocacy scene it is essential that we have a functioning intellectual counterpart to provide genuine substance beyond the protesters and sloganeers.

With a surfeit of conviction noise-makers, it is to be hoped that more of our think tanks will focus on evidence-based policy development and open-ended research. By open-ended, I mean research that starts with a question rather than a conclusion. The questions should be formulated along these lines: "what policy will create the most prosperous society?", not "what free-market policy will create the most prosperous society?"; "how can we minimise social inequity?", not "what progressive policy would minimise social inequity?".

With funding sources such a sensitive issue - suspicion is often cast on the motives of private funders, and I don't know why the motives of government should be considered beyond question - this may mean finding new ways to appeal to the small community of quiet philanthropists who are willing to have their opinions challenged.

While rare, such people do exist and would welcome the opportunity to support a genuine attempt at non-ideological policy development.

Should the progression from think tank to advocate progress further, I'm afraid the results will look something like the joke about hell in which the English do the cooking, the French the plumbing and the lovers are Swiss; in Hell-Australia the Occupiers will provide the intellectual substance, the politicians the integrity and the think tanks will be reduced to talking heads.

The economists will be left sole guardians of the greater good. Lord help us all.

Parnell McGuinness is the principal of Thought Broker and the editor of *Binge Thinking* magazine, which is available for download from www.thoughtbroker.com.au.

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