

Hunting for WZB Treasures When Think Tank and Basic Research Collide

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In the autumn of 2014, I had the pleasure of spending two months at the WZB before officially launching my own think tank project, the European Democracy Lab, in January 2015. As someone who works on European politics in the public sector, I wanted to take the opportunity to see for once what the academics were doing. What and how does the WZB research (about) Europe and the EU? My goals: transferring knowledge, creating connections.

For me, the WZB was neither entirely new nor completely familiar. I had been there for events. But the fast-moving world of think tanks in which I work only has a limited area of overlap with the WZB, which focuses on basic research. The policy-making business of Berlin's think tanks involves the airy, almost ethereal task of coming up with buzz words, while acting as the putty between static political institutions and NGO representatives like me, who hope to exert influence in a specific policy area. Who will win the struggle to control the discourse? The WZB, in contrast, is more of a closed space with its own gravitational force and gravitas. It has many (often international) sensors and antennae, as well as a web of contacts in academia, but it is not exactly at the centre of political Berlin. It's more of an independent ecosystem on its fringes. I wonder where I will discover the link between research and politics.

The WZB operates like clockwork. On my first day there, I have my office, keys, computer, password, papers, and am listed on the WZB website within two hours of my arrival. There are people to look after my every need, from the janitor to the librarian. The only things I have to do myself are think, read, and write. I hadn't been in such a comfortable position in years. I had spent the previous fifteen years setting up and developing various European policy think tanks. Usually one starts out with just a room and a mobile phone, going on to build up a list of contacts and obtain a landline.

But for now, my role is still that of an observer. I try to adapt the routines of the institution in

order to hide my feelings of alienation from the others. I perceive the subtle differences to the outside world that become apparent when the weighty WZB door swings shut behind me. The thing I notice most is a different perception of time and space. The holy grail of the German social sciences exudes a sense of permanence and an almost tangible atmosphere of concentration. Nothing ever seems hectic at the WZB; instead, academia has the pace of the *longue durée*.

Another element that makes me feel insecure is the realization of what has happened in the world of research and universities during the last decades. Everything is new to me. I received my doctorate in 1995 and left university before the advent of the EU student exchange program Erasmus, DOI numbers, the inflation of peer-reviewed journals (who actually reads them all?), external funding, evaluation pressure, international master's programs, and structured doctoral and postdoctoral tracks. In my day, if you got invited, then you took part in an advanced seminar with the eminent historian and political scientist Karl Dietrich Bracher. I can't remember a political science dissertation that was remotely as specific, technical, or theoretical as the papers that circulate in the Global Governance unit.

What on earth has happened? Does everyone do things this way now? More than a generation lies between myself, who has just turned fifty, and the thirty-something researchers at the WZB. I come from another planet, from the university world of my memory – and I feel deeply intimidated. If lifelong learning is a feature of the postmodern world, then I've just hit the jackpot, but at the cost of my own deconstruction: I can't do any of the things that are required today, the things that are now considered the norm. This is not a bolstering experience to have mid-career.

At the WZB, if you don't have anything else to do, you can just go ahead and start reading and writing. I miss the basic hum of busyness that I know from the corridors of the Bundestag

and the Federal Press Conference building. The WZB, so I realize with amazement, is a largely telephone-free zone. Personal arrangements are made via e-mail, and the workplace culture of most research groups is such that chats in the office kitchen are seldom.

I'm not used to all this, and it has the effect of stretching time infinitely. The librarian gets hold of eleven books for me in the blink of an eye. During the EU elections, I had noticed that a number of young think tanks had been founded, which were all committed to coming up with a different kind of Europe. Could this trend be summarized under the term 'European democracy' instead of European integration? Was there a new idea of Europe lurking behind the new semantics? I wanted to take a closer look at this. Was there a generational shift driving the debate on Europe? And what had researchers discovered about it?

During my temporary mutation into a researcher, when I had to deal with things like research questions, bodies of literature, theoretical frameworks, methods, data, dependent and independent variables (my God, what does it all mean?), I was always worried about saying the wrong thing or failing to express things the way the others do – i.e., scientifically. I have published in professional journals on Europe, written policy papers and provided European policy advice, but it quickly becomes clear to me that I am on foreign territory at the WZB; I am no longer sure-footed, unable to connect. And it also becomes clear to me that my body of scientific literature is thin, my theoretical basis non-existent, and that I have not mastered the correct style of speaking.

This draws a permanent, tangible line dividing me and the group. Can I open my mouth here at all? Working on European issue from an academic perspective is completely different from working in European politics – the former's mode of analysis is sober, detached. The members of the department are exceedingly nice and are very patient when dealing with their temporary alien from the real world. 'When you say 'terrorism', do you mean what people in the real world understand by terrorism, or do you mean ...?' asks one person in a seminar. Then it dawns on me: There's the real world, which is out there, and there is the WZB, which observes and analyses this world, but somehow does not quite belong to it.

I start to realize that words are not just words, but terms – democracy, party, populism, legitimacy – that need to be clearly defined. In academia, nothing can simply be said. Everything needs to have a theoretical concept, a clear framework. In the political sphere, however, the same words are used thoughtlessly. Will I

be able to toss off the phrase 'European democracy' the next time I appear on the radio? The second learning experience: One becomes cautious. Academia sharpens the mind.

My initial intimidation is succeeded by curiosity: What exactly do all these people do here? Intuitively, I have the sense that in the Global Governance research unit many things are expressed and classified that can only be vaguely sensed 'from the outside', such as a scientific survey of the malaise in European politics, a mapping of the levels of indignation about the EU that is felt in society. The democratic deficit, legitimacy problems – all of these things can be captured in data sets, processed into figures, broken down into research questions, and bundled into theories. Week after week, I try to unravel and absorb all of this. It's a kind of crash course in the social sciences.

Slowly I begin to translate often-abstract research findings into political language. If this is the theoretical problem, what could constitute a practical political response? I observe myself from an aerial perspective. I discover that I had previously been engaged in 'meaning making' with regard to European politics, and that even this can be studied and analysed scientifically: I was (or am) a member of a 'discursive collective' and a 'discourse coalition' on Europe. Funnily enough, I find my name in a book about influential think tanks which lists their key people. One's own self as the object of research? The abstraction of my own self is a key that allows me to rethink my own identity: Thank you, WZB!

Now I can begin my treasure hunt. I realize that – if one looks beyond the occasional complexly worded questions, the abstract statements, and the impenetrable data sets – the WZB also contains many gems. Many of the things that I observed in my everyday work 'on the outside' are backed up by WZB studies and figures: for example, the fact that ordinary citizens are often much more European-minded in their attitudes than national politicians. I work my way through studies of all kinds. Two months for reading are a gift, a luxury, an intellectual enrichment. I discover numbers underpinning what I myself perceive in the public debate, indicators of a horizontal Europeanisation of society. I find empirical evidence for my everyday assumptions, and note down accurate definitions that serve to sharpen my own way of thinking.

My conclusion? Just as students often spend a year abroad, so should more politicians, journalists, lobbyists, or indeed anyone who works in the public sphere, spend an academic trimester at the WZB. The social sciences can do you a world of good!



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