

**Spreading Ideas to Govern the World –
Inventing an Institutionalizing the Neoliberal Think Tank**

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ABSTRACT

Today, a dense network of neoliberal think tanks is playing a significant role in spreading, entrenching and (in those times of crisis) defending across the world a neoliberal doxa – an important ideological backbone of contemporary political and economic governance. Within this dense web, one actor has been and remains highly significant and interesting – the Atlas Economic Research Foundation (Atlas). Sir Antony Fisher founded Atlas in 1981 in the USA. In 1955, he had already set up in London the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). As is well known, the IEA played a pivotal role in the spreading of a neoliberal ideology within British public opinion and politics in the 1970s and 1980s. With Atlas, Anthony Fisher wanted to take the next step – the mission of Atlas would be to “to litter the world with free-market think tanks”. As Atlas helped constitute and stabilize many individual think tanks across the world, it discovered in the process a second role for itself – that of transforming an emergent loose network into a coordinated and integrated transnational community. In this paper, I focus on the articulation of these two roles and the dynamics they imply. My interest here is to deconstruct the ways in which an organizational strategy and an ideological program combine and contribute in time to the construction of a powerful governance backbone – with an influence not only on opinion making but also on policy-making. I am particularly keen to understand the transnational articulation of this influence building process that is so specific to the case of Atlas.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, think tanks, transnational governance