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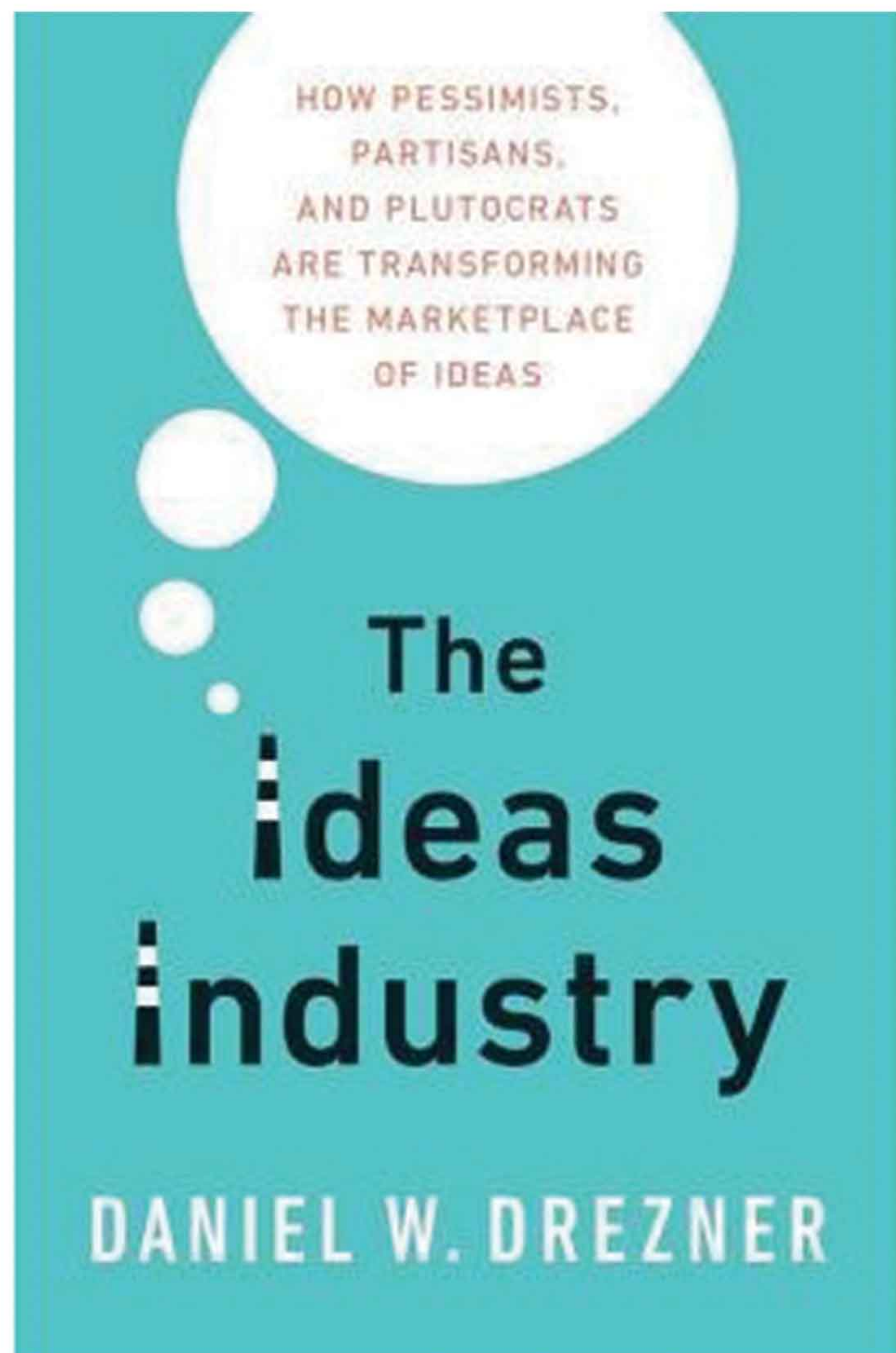
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A possible subtitle for Dan Drezner's forthcoming book, *The Ideas Industry: How Pessimists, Partisans, and Plutocrats are Transforming the Marketplace of Ideas* is "Pathologies of Places I've Worked At, and How It's Getting Worse." I mean this as both a compliment and a criticism. Drezner is a rare scholar whose public policy impact is every bit as great as his scholarly one. As such, he is ideally placed to assess the transformation of what he calls the "Ideas Industry," a general term for the network of institutions producing new (or repackaged) foreign policy ideas.

This industry, he claims, is undergoing sharp changes that privilege thought leaders, individuals who confidently assert a single big idea. Further, it hampers public intellectuals, those for whom doubt drives substantial, persistent critiques of policy, large and small. Specifically, Drezner points to three elements:

1. The erosion of trust, especially in institutions, which allows multiple sources of authority (although not necessarily accuracy or analytical rigor) to flourish;
2. Political polarization, which leads people to seek out echo chambers and produce a fragmented media environment of contesting, exclusionary narratives; and
3. Income inequality, which concentrates wealth into fewer hands, granting those individuals massive influence over the analytical results produced by the idea-generating organizations they fund.

Drezner provides an excellent overview of how these three factors are affecting several components of the Ideas Industry – the academy, think tanks, and the research arms of private companies – as well as how these changes have affected the quality of the ideas being produced. It's not a pretty picture. Drezner does point to some successes: the uncovering of political scientist Michael LaCour's deception and fabrications in his research on same-sex marriage is a particularly nota-



ble example of how social media can activate analytical resources to challenge authority and received wisdom. But the book is filled with lucidly written anecdotes about how thought leaders simply shrug off valid criticism, leading to the implementation of wasteful, poorly conceived, and even harmful foreign policies.

As someone with a similar professional background (although by no means as accomplished), I found the anecdotes to be painfully familiar, and I count myself fortunate for having avoided any mention on the Political Science Rumors website. But Drezner's anecdotes remain just that: anecdotes. They are entertaining to be sure, and the points on intellectual integrity, editori-

ial/curation, and the effective challenging of weak ideas are worrying and compelling on their own. But in total, the book provides a disjointed picture of how new foreign policy ideas are generated and acted upon, both in the past and now.

What is the foreign-policy process, and where does each of these components fit in? Exactly how do ideas translate into policy? I have no doubt that think tanks, economists, and businesspeople have some influence on Washington. But how much, and exactly how far can these governmental outsiders overturn, say, bureaucratic inertia? Do they have an effect only if they reach the right individual, and who is that person anyway? Policy is an enormously complicated process, and before we can effectively assess how new conditions have privileged thought leaders over public intellectuals, we must understand how it works. Under what conditions do think tanks, academia, and the research arms of private firms affect policy making? Which ones have traditionally had a larger impact, and how can we know that?

This is particularly the case with Chapter 6, which discusses how private industry is getting into the ideas business. For-profit think tanks represent a burgeoning source of funding for thought leaders. But do they actually have much influence on the policy-making process? Drezner points to the BRICs concept, and it is an excellent example of a marketing tool that gained wider public and intellectual traction. But he also notes how the BRICs concept has done remarkably poorly as an investment vehicle or indeed as a geopolitical category. From my own extensive research (i.e., asking my wife, a Goldman Sachs employee), I think that it is questionable how much impact these firms have within their own industry, let alone in foreign policy. While McKinsey invests \$400 million in “knowledge development,” that represents only about 7.5 percent of its estimated revenue.¹ The evidence in Drezner’s book is compelling, but it’s hard to glean a complete picture of the policy-making process and its link to the Ideas Industry. Might the latter just be a grown-up version of an undergraduate bull session, with few people outside the room paying much attention?

A second critique is what social scientists call *case selection*. Drezner surveys a wide range of institutions in this study, including academia generally, economics, political science, think tanks, consulting firms, private intelligence outfits, and several others. But why are these par-

ticular fields chosen? What allows them to give us particular insight into how the Ideas Industry works and is changing?

To point out three examples, the legal profession is widely represented in the halls of American political power. Although their numbers have been declining in Congress,² as of 2014, our representatives were 66 times as likely to be lawyers compared to Americans as a whole.³ Legal modes of thought, evidence, and analysis have arguably had a far larger impact than that of political scientists and even economists, but they are absent from Drezner’s book.

Similarly, where does media fit into all of this? Print journalism is surely declining. Yet, can we attribute the rise of outfits like FiveThirtyEight, Politico, and Vox to their willingness to act as thought leaders? To the contrary, each of these venues seems to delight in greater detail and rigor, unlike thought leaders who according to Drezner present a single large idea confidently and with only limited engagement of counterevidence. The fact that FiveThirtyEight in particular continues to discuss sources of estimation bias and elaborate justifications for specific quantities of interest suggests the opposite of what Drezner discusses.

Finally, what about the military, intelligence services, and associated defense consultancies and Federally Funded Research and Development Centers that churn out significant research and analysis? There is obviously no way to cover all these organizations or industries in a single book. But a stronger justification for why specific components of the Ideas Industry were chosen and not others would have helped to situate the evidence within a wider context.

Drezner also devotes several chapters to the effects that the three conditions have on the quality of ideas being produced. On the one hand, they lead to a greater variety of ideas with facilitated access to the national dialogue. But on the other hand, the industry is not doing as good of a job culling bad ideas. This points to two areas where Drezner could extend his argument, with some disturbing implications.

First, Drezner points out how the decline of institutional authority has eroded the privileges that gatekeepers once had. As a result, that critical editorial role – the analysis that determines whether an argument is both



Washington DC, USA. 44th President of the United States Barack Obama addresses a joint session of Congress (Lawrence Jackson/Public Domain)

sound and worthy of publication – has been diminished. But the need for editing and curation has not declined, and so it has effectively been outsourced to the individual consumer of information. We must each act as our own critic of thought leadership as traditional institutions falter. But is the general American public ready to take on that kind of role? Specific individuals certainly are not; just consider the intellectual myopia that leads people to dismiss all contrary evidence, indeed whole classes of sources, as fake news. Even without partisanship (discussed below), do Americans generally possess the analytical skills to carefully evaluate evidence and argument? My teaching experience at Princeton, SUNY-Albany, and Fordham suggests the answer is a resounding “no,” and the educational system – from primary to graduate school – should grapple with exactly how we are preparing Americans to be effective consumers of information and therefore citizens.

A second, arguably more disturbing thought is whether polarization produces different types of thought leaders on the left and right. This would be because – at least within policy circles and Congress – Republicans have disincentivized engagement in critical debate. To be fair, Republican and Democratic voters are roughly equal in their ability to fail at evaluating ideas. They just fail on different subjects: GMOs and vaccines on the left, climate change and evolution on the right. Everyone is wildly off the mark when it comes to how much the U.S. spends on foreign aid.

But this equality does not hold when we consider *politicians*. Democratic politicians are more willing to follow scientific consensus, perhaps because a majority of scientists identify as Democrats.⁴ Meanwhile, Republican politicians cut funding to critical supporters of scholarly analysis like the National Science Foundation. This is not because conservatives are somehow inherently bad at analysis: in foreign policy, the Republican Party possesses many deep thinkers and respected authorities that should be and are listened to on both sides of the aisle. But nearly all of them were sidelined in the 2016 election, excoriated as part of a corrupt and elitist establishment. The political right has been captured by a populist “know-nothingism” that actively rejects reasoned debate. Again, the voters on the left do this too. But at the institutional level, it is telling that the policy positions held by the majority of scientists on climate change and evolution are an official part of the Democratic platform, while those that are rejected (say, anti-vaccination positions) are not. The same cannot be said of the Republican side.

When we think about the echo-chamber effect, then, we should also consider how differences within each chamber affect the quality of ideas across them. For the past 60 years, the left has generally been a “coalition of coalitions,” having to cobble together electoral majorities from groups with relatively little in common. But the disparate nature of the Democratic base has meant internal negotiation and debate, which presumably should give greater room for public intellectuals to

voice their critiques. The right, however, has been much more homogenous demographically and politically, potentially facilitating polarization (as Mann and Ornstein note). In such an environment, right-leaning populist thought leaders face fewer criticisms and can more easily dismiss what criticisms they do receive as part of a liberal agenda. Similarly, Republican politicians face few political incentives to defect from this consensus. They might quickly be punished by their constituents, as happened with the wave of Tea Party challengers in 2010 and 2012. In the aggregate, we should therefore see less-rigorous foreign policy ideas coming out of the right, but simultaneously high levels of support for those ideas on that side of the political spectrum.

In Chapter 7, Drezner compares the fates of Fareed Zakaria and Niall Ferguson in their respective intellectual scandals. Zakaria plagiarized pieces from other authors in his writings, while Ferguson falsified numbers to make doomsday predictions about Obama's economic policy that never materialized. Drezner argues that Ferguson came out of his episode better than Zakaria because the former was more of a thought leader than a public intellectual. The argument is compelling, but this difference could be because Ferguson is seen as a specifically conservative thought leader. Drezner notes that Ferguson responded to his critics by politicizing their attacks. But such a response works better the more polarized your intended audience. Would Zakaria have done just as well had he politicized his attackers? It's possible, but I would like to think that plagiarism harms your credibility regardless of your political positions.

If this idea is correct – that the left and right are producing different types of idea generators – then it is fundamentally one of institutional weakness. This is enormously problematic for American diplomacy, as a central pillar of foreign policy thinking has substituted simple catchphrases for dedicated and difficult conversations based on expertise. The entire country, not to

mention the world, suffers from the absence of the institutional backing of these voices. Moreover, an effective solution to this situation is difficult to identify. Partisan electoral victors would have to be convinced that their victory may do lasting harm to national dialogue and policy. Just try getting that message into Congress – Republican or Democratic controlled – or even the White House.

In short, what are the recursive effects of polarization, income inequality, and institutional erosion on Drezner's own theory? Might we see an acceleration toward big, simplistic ideas that provide emotional comfort for the intellectually uncurious at the expense of making their lives demonstrably worse? And what is the road away from this admittedly bleak situation?

Much of this review has asked to what extent individual actors within the Ideas Industry are important to the policy-making process. But there is little doubt that ideas as a general contribution to our national dialogue on foreign policy are important. The challenge lies in protecting a healthy institutional environment for that dialogue to continue and even flourish. The concentration of power and influence that Drezner identifies and explains threatens the effective evaluation of foreign policy, and we are all weaker as a result. Hopefully this book and its insights will lead to that broader shift that better policy and better ideas require.

¹ "To the brainy, the spoils," *Economist*, May 11, 2013, <<https://www.economist.com/news/business/21577376-world-grows-more-confusing-demand-clever-consultants-booming-brainy>>.

² Ana Swanson, "How the Most Disliked—And Elected—Profession Is Disappearing from Politics," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/01/19/how-the-most-disliked-and-elected-profession-is-disappearing-from-politics/?utm_term=.9f36aefaf7c1>.

³ "How Politicians Are Unlike America," *Economist*, December 30, 2014, <<http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21637419-how-politicians-are-unlike-america>>.

⁴ *Pew Research Center*, "Section 4: Scientists, Politics, and Religion," July 9, 2009, <<http://www.people-press.org/2009/07/09/section-4-scientists-politics-and-religion/>>.

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