

Original Article

‘Acting like chameleons’: On the McDonaldization of private security

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Abstract Private security is a fragmented industry with tens of thousands of small- and medium-sized suppliers worldwide. However, with the arrival in the market of multinational brands such as Group 4 Securicor and Securitas, we are witnessing a McDonaldization of security commodities. This development signals the global introduction of recognizable logos and uniforms along with standardized services and products. After providing the latest statistics on the growth of private security in Europe, we give examples of how the McDonaldization of this industry is evolving throughout the continent. Our examples illustrate that, following the lead of traditional corporate customers, governments have also started to use contract guards and other private security services. This article also addresses the driving forces behind the rise of multinational security companies, and the opportunities and challenges they present to Western societies. *Security Journal* (2013) **26**, 294–309. doi:10.1057/sj.2013.18; published online 13 May 2013

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Introduction

In their early, groundbreaking publications on contract security guards in Canada, Shearing *et al* (1980) underline that the spread of what they term ‘mass private property’ (shopping malls, airport terminals, leisure parks and the like) is a key driver of the growth of the private security industry. They associate this commercial provision of guarding and investigative services with strategies of loss prevention and asset protection inside corporations. Business clients of private security companies, in the view of Shearing and colleagues, tend to define crime in purely instrumental terms tailored to their profit-making motives, rather than troubling themselves with moral questions such as catching and bringing a criminal to justice. This corresponds to a shift towards ‘private justice’ (Shearing and Stenning, 1983) in the sense that commercial security companies prioritize the interests of their paying customers, which may undermine public accountability mechanisms.

However, over the past decade, private security companies have penetrated new markets, which seem less concerned with issues of loss prevention. Led by huge security



multinationals (see Johnston, 2000; Walker, 2003), the industry has slowly but surely penetrated policy fields that were formerly regarded as the sole responsibility of the state. At present, there is hardly any police and criminal justice function imaginable that cannot be performed by a private security company (Stenning, 2000). This implies that private security is currently melding into broader discussions of ‘pluralized’ policing (Jones *et al.*, 2009) and ‘privatized’ prisons (Shefer and Liebling, 2008) in numerous ways. Indeed, classical distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres have been increasingly rendered obsolete (Kempa *et al.*, 1999). Scholars can no longer focus solely on Shearing and colleagues’ initially narrow classification of private security, as it tends to overlook many private security staff hired by governments.

For the purpose of our article, therefore, we follow Sarre and Prenzler (2009) in their definition of private security as:

those persons who are employed or sponsored by a commercial enterprise on a contract or ‘in-house’ basis, using public or private funds, to engage in tasks (other than vigilante-style action) where the principal component is a security or regulatory function. (p. 4)

Contract security refers to specialized private security companies offering services and products on a profit basis. ‘In-house’ security, on the other hand, relates to internal private security departments in corporate entities that are not specialized private security companies (for example, banks, insurance companies, leisure parks, large chains of hotels, pubs and clubs). This article for the most part comments on the enormous growth of contract security as in-house guarding has been largely devolved (or ‘contracted-out’) to specialized private security companies – a dynamic that ‘transforms many private and public-sector organizations from producers of goods and services to consumers, where the responsibility for commissioning and purchasing services is separated from the responsibility for providing them’ (Lippert and O’Connor, 2003, p. 339). Yet, there still exist continued operations of corporate in-house security (Hutchinson and O’Connor, 2005; van Steden, 2007) and there are governments that, at least for a period of time, have ‘in-sourced’ privatized security activities. Following the 9/11 attacks, private security staff guarding airports in the United States were accused of incompetence, which meant that their posts were returned to state hands (Seidensat, 2004). That said, the emphasis here is on the position of contract security as an outsourced extension of both public and private authorities.

More recently, Johnston and Shearing (2003) have begun to characterize such hybrid examples of security provision as ‘networked’ forms of governance in which the state is ‘only one node among many’. Loader and Walker (2007) introduced the idea of ‘anchored pluralism’, rigorously criticizing the assumptions underlying the networked or nodal governance perspective. They stress that the state continues to have a major say in how security is governed and coordinated. Nevertheless, a closer look at the idea(s) of ‘nodal’ and ‘state-anchored’ security networks reveals that the ways political contexts *in conjunction with* economic contexts are shaping the conduct of private security markets are often underestimated (White, 2012). Discussions should therefore not be limited to whether or not states are steering and regulating markets; they are also influenced and affected by these markets themselves. Thus far, empirical studies into the depth and wealth of this ‘new political economy of private security’ have been scarce. Much of the existing academic literature on the privatization and pluralization processes is normatively and theoretically driven, without paying much attention to changing realities of private security worldwide.

In fact, our common knowledge of what private security is and does has become fairly outdated.

It is against this backdrop that we start our exploration of the research agendas that Sarre (2005) and White (2012) have set out. These include questions related to the expansion of private security, the reasons why the industry has mushroomed, the industry's interface with branches of the state (police and criminal justice) and the critiques of the essentially public goods that policing and security represent. The next section sketches the contours of private security in Europe using fresh information made available by the Confederation of European Security Services (CoESS).¹ Special attention is given to the phenomenon of multinationals, specifically Group 4 Securicor (G4S) and Securitas, which have come to dominate the market. In addition, the swift rise of such multinationals exemplify what Ritzer (2004) coins 'McDonaldization' – that is, dimensions that lie at the heart of the famous fast-food chain's managerial model and that are increasingly affecting sectors of modern society, including private security. We illustrate this development with some striking cases in Europe. The following section examines the factors that can explain the contemporary prominence of 'global security assemblages' (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009). Finally, we address the opportunities as well as the challenges that stem from global changes in security governance. Themes include the private security industry's relationship with the state, along with the vital importance of proper accountability mechanisms.

Private Security in Europe

As outlined in previous work (de Waard, 1999; van Steden and Sarre, 2007), any attempt to measure private security remains an educated guess. It is often difficult to sketch an accurate picture of the size and growth of the private security industry, as it is not a homogenous industry, the reliability of data varies and statistics do not always distinguish between part-time and full-time personnel. Nevertheless, since the late 1990s, observers of private security have attempted to draw systematic comparisons between national industries based on their own research and statistics collected by CoESS. This makes it possible to interpret developments in an international context. According to de Waard's (1999) first comparative study, in 1996, approximately 600 000 contract guards were working in the European security market. In 2004, this number had reached roughly 1.1 million. It should be noted, however, that de Waard's study assessed 15 EU member states, whereas the latter study anticipated a growth to 25 member states.² Correcting for the enlarged European Union over the 1996–2004 period, the growth of contract guards can be set at about 141 000 over 5 years (van Steden and Sarre, 2007; Brodeur, 2010).

Table 1 presents the latest statistics available for public and private security services across Europe. These statistics result in over 2.17 million contract guards employed by private security companies (CoESS, 2011). Again, however, a direct comparison with 2004 figures is somewhat artificial, as the number of countries taken into consideration grew from 25 to 34, including 27 member states and 7 affiliated European countries.³ Looking at the original 25 countries, we arrive at a growth of about 400 000 contract guards in total over the 2004–2011 period. This rapid increase may also be due to some corrections to the initial data. For example, the growth in contract guards in the United Kingdom suddenly jumped from 150 000 in 2004 to over 360 000 security guards in 2011. At the same time, as early as

Table 1: Private security in Europe

<i>Country</i>	<i>Total private security</i>	<i>Security force/population ratio</i>	<i>Police force/population ratio</i>
Austria	±10 000	1/523	1/380
Belgium	15 411	1/703	1/266
Bosnia & Herzegovina	4207	1/2295	1/217
Bulgaria	57 146	1/132	1/155
Croatia	±16 000	1/276	1/216
Cyprus	±1700	1/472	1/156
Czech Republic	51 542	1/203	1/238
Denmark	5000	1/1106	1/503
Estonia	4627	1/289	1/412
Finland	12 500	1/899	1/701
France	147 800	1/437	1/271
Germany	168 000	1/484	1/326
Greece	±30 000	1/376	1/428
Hungary	80 000	1/125	1/380
Ireland	20 000	1/223	1/344
Italy	47 858	1/1260	1/565
Latvia	21 500	1/105	1/300
Lithuania	11 000	1/294	1/290
Luxembourg	2700	1/185	1/330
Macedonia	4000	1/410	1/213
Malta	1600	1/256	1/215
The Netherlands	31 543	1/526	1/461
Norway	7750	1/387	1/567
Poland	300 000	1/190	1/388
Portugal	±38 928	1/275	1/228
Romania	107 000	1/229	1/1050
Serbia	50 000	1/146	1/218
Slovakia	±17 200	1/314	1/251
Slovenia	6364	1/326	1/256
Spain	188 018	1/513	1/213
Sweden	20 000	1/467	1/522
Switzerland	17 742	1/636	1/463
Turkey	427 967	1/4077	1/220
United Kingdom	364 586	1/170	1/382
Total	±2 175 000	31.11 (average per 10 000 inhabitants)	36.28 (average per 10 000 inhabitants)

in 1995, Jones and Newburn set the number of security guards and related occupations in Britain at no less than 162 000 (Jones and Newburn, 1995). CoESS calculated that, on average, there are 31 security guards employed per 10 000 European inhabitants. This number is slightly higher (36) for the public police. Police are still the dominant player in Europe, although the private security industry already outnumbers the police in several countries. The total annual turnover of the private European security industry was valued at around €35 billion in 2011 (CoESS, 2011).

Private security is a fragmented industry. There are tens of thousands of different companies, large and small, operating in national and regional security markets worldwide.

Even in a small country like the Netherlands, there are by now approximately 400 active providers of private security. However, due to large-scale mergers, the European security market is undergoing a process of globalization and concentration, which is bound to continue in the future. In particular, the emergence of G4S (675 000 staff in 125 countries)⁴ and Securitas (300 000 staff in 51 countries),⁵ companies that are listed on the stock exchanges of London and Stockholm, respectively, constitute a serious source of political and economic power at the global level. To give an impression of the sheer size of such businesses: in late 2011, G4S hastily aborted its £5.2 billion takeover bid for ISS, a Danish cleaning and facility company. Under pressure from their shareholders, the G4S management board had no other choice than to pull out. If the deal had been agreed, this would have created the world's biggest security and cleaning conglomerate 'and the second-largest private sector employer after Walmart, the American retailer with 1.2 million employees in more than 130 countries' (*Financial Times*, 1 November 2011).

At the same time, scholars by and large overlooked the fact that private security now has a global scope. Most attention went to commercial military companies like Academi⁶ (formally known as Blackwater and Xe Services) whose mercenaries scandalously misbehaved in Iraq. No less pervasive, though, is the growth of massive commercial firms that offer everyday guarding and protection services in our local supermarkets, office blocks and public streets up to armed protection against pirates ravaging the Somalian shores. Therefore, as Abrahamsen and Williams (2007) argue, we should

broaden the scope of analysis away from the preoccupation with military privatization to focus instead on the globalization of private commercial security: that is, the much more mundane, day-to-day activities of security companies operating mostly (but not exclusively) in non-conflict environments and dedicated to protecting 'life and assets'. (p. 238)

A possible reason for neglecting private security in global governance lies in the prejudice that the privatization of state security functions is *ipso facto* illicit (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009). Private security staff are readily associated with organized violence exercised by paramilitary groups and additional subversive elements who selfishly protect their own benefits to the detriment of others.

Although there may be some truth in this argument, it overlooks the point that a mushrooming private security does not necessarily erode or replace sovereign state power. Contract guards may also support police forces and contribute to the maintenance of public order in such ways that they are welcomed as a beneficial response to government deficits, not least in transitional countries (van Steden and Sarre, 2010a). In this light, the expansion of multinational security corporations re-articulates and transforms common public/private and global/local distinctions set against broader economic and political changes (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007, 2009). In particular, with the introduction of their 'nodal governance' concept, Johnston and Shearing (2003) have opened a window on hybrid forms of security in which corporate actors occupy a prominent position. The services and tasks these actors perform go much further than loss prevention on behalf of private customers. A significant growth market consists of agencies to assist government sectors, including defense, police, criminal justice, prisons and rehabilitation services. Whether national governments like it or not, private security is demanding a prominent position in crime and disorder control.



McDonaldized Private Security

In *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer (2004) describes how the rational principles – predictability, efficiency, calculability and control – of the popular fast-food chain have deeply penetrated modern society. A similar analysis applies to G4S and Securitas, as they attempt to enforce recognizable, worldwide company policies. First, these multinationals pursue the delivery of standardized uniforms, products and services. Moreover, according to their business plans, both companies try to implement identical corporate standards with respect to training and performance. This ensures that G4S or Securitas staff look more or less the same around the globe, and behave accordingly (predictability). A second important McDonaldized element of private security is a preoccupation with efficiency. Both G4S and Securitas claim to be cheaper, more flexible and more client-oriented than police, prisons and other criminal justice institutions.

Third, the worldwide private security industry subscribes to the creed that ‘bigger is better’: ‘quantity has become equivalent to quality’ (Ritzer, 2004, p. 15). As contract guards and related private security services are relatively affordable to hire, customers feel they can get a lot of value for their money (calculability). The demand side of the market therefore primarily bases its decision to buy security on the basis of price (van Steden and Sarre, 2010b). Finally, empirical research shows that control is part and parcel of the McDonaldized world of private security (Wakefield, 2003). Not only do contract guards exert control over visitors in shopping malls and airport terminals, but they are themselves subject to control and discipline mechanisms. CCTV cameras keep an eye on the masses, but turn out to be equally important in ensuring that private security guards are faithfully doing their duty. When they do not work hard enough, security guards may even be under threat of replacement by non-human technology, such as CCTV and digital access control.

It is a mistake, though, to assume that the McDonaldization of private security means that multinationals look completely homogeneous in all cultures and countries. Rather, creating homogeneity goes hand in hand with processes of heterogenization. The global can be found in the local, and vice versa. This stems from business strategies of ‘global localization’ (or ‘glocalization’), which signifies the adaption of multinationals to local conditions and circumstances. As Robertson (1995) argues:

the idea of glocalization in its business sense is closely related to what in some contexts is called, in more straightforwardly economic terms, micro-marketing: the tailoring and advertising of goods and services on a global or near-global basis to increasingly differentiated local and particular markets. ... To a considerable extent micromarketing – or, in the more comprehensive phrase, glocalization – involves *the construction* of increasingly differentiated consumers, the ‘invention’ of ‘consumer traditions’ ... To put it very simply, diversity sells. (pp. 28–29; emphasis in the original)

As to G4S and Securitas, glocalization implies that both companies are ‘acting like chameleons’ (Bisom-Rapp, 2004, p. 303), with sales techniques and operational styles that switch depending on the jurisdictions and worksites in which they are active. Where legislation and political conditions allow, they penetrate deeply into police, criminal justice and even military functions, challenging the vital pillars on which sovereign state power rests, whereas elsewhere the same multinationals are retreating to a more modest posture within the context of strong(er) regulations.

This brings us to two paradigms of policing (and security in a wider sense) that are visible in the literature. On the one hand, ‘low policing’, refers to mostly mundane, but sometimes forceful, police reactions to conspicuous signs of crime and disorder. ‘High policing’, on the other hand, reaches out to protect established political and economic orders by intelligence gathering and other intrusive actions (Brodeur, 1983). Taking the concept of policing more broadly than a government service, the adjectives ‘low’ and ‘high’ may also apply to private security and security governance. In his later work, Brodeur (2010, p. 307) writes that ‘although the differences between high and low policing do not fully coincide as we move from the public to the private sector, they are to some extent analogous’. For example, the history of private security reveals that strike-breaking, as a form of high policing, was largely performed by contract guards. Moreover, both state institutions and large corporations have much to gain from secrecy to protect their vested interests. Yet, Brodeur emphasizes that state policing has stronger connections to the formal justice system of courts, lawyers and public prosecutors than its private counterparts. Although Shearing *et al* (1980) argued the top priority of private security companies is loss prevention, today private security is going well beyond this aim. The next section confirms that companies can indeed be concerned with purely commercial interests, but simultaneously shows the upsurge of a ‘grey’ (Hoogenboom, 1991) security complex that straddles public/private dichotomies. As such, the private security industry is playing a growing role in defending public interests like the control of disorder, crime and terrorism.

Multinational Private Security in Action

What do multinational private security companies do? This question is not easy to answer, given the enormous span of products and services they provide worldwide. Therefore, using some telling examples and cases, we map out empirical illustrations of McDonaldized private security in European countries. We distinguish between four segments – corporate protection, critical infrastructure protection, investigation services and government support services – in which multinational companies operate. These are discussed below in turn.

Corporate protection

At the lowest segment of the industry we find those classical private security sectors that can be labeled as ‘corporate protection’. The first sector involves contract guards who carry out surveillance and security services, including access control, regulatory and supervisory tasks, and reception functions in privately owned spaces. Think, for instance, of areas like shopping malls, office buildings, sport grounds, gated communities, hotels, pubs, schools and universities. Guarding staff comprise by far the largest segment of the total private security market. Their core business is to provide a safe working/leisure environment and to protect corporate assets. In addition to supplying contract guards (with or without trained dogs), this can also mean that multinational companies provide caretakers and cleaners to their customers.

A second sector of this market consists of ‘in-house’ or ‘corporate’ guards, who perform internal duties for numerous private organizations such as banks, insurance companies,



industrial zones and leisure parks. Over the past quarter century, the number of in-house security staff has declined rapidly. Resulting from the out-sourcing of non-core business activities, specialized private companies have taken over most of the in-house segment (Lippert and O'Connor, 2003; van Steden, 2007). A third sector involves high-security transports hosted by armoured couriers. They carry out a range of different tasks, but the best known are the transportation of cash and other valuables and the maintenance of ATM machines.

Finally, a sizeable private security sector is aimed at corporate protection concerns alarm monitoring services and CCTV cameras delivered to private customers (for example, shopkeepers) and governments. This technical equipment segment should not be underrated, as the number and range of products has expanded exponentially in the post-9/11 era. Technologies have spread rapidly in such directions as 'smart' cameras, automatic fire protection systems, biometric entrance controls, smartphone applications and 'securitized' SUVs (Goold *et al*, 2010). Securitas Alert Services, for instance, offers high-tech track and trace technologies to keep a digital eye on cars, trucks and people.

Critical infrastructure protection

Climbing further up, we arrive at the segment of 'critical infrastructure protection'. Although the accurate functioning of such infrastructural elements is often taken for granted, any disturbances may have a serious effect across society at large. Some elements form not what can be called infrastructures, but rather they make up a network that supports vital assets and lifelines. As Rothery (2005) argues:

bringing food from the paddock to the plate is dependent not only on particular key facilities but also on a complex network of producers, processors, manufacturers, distributors and retailers. Where an incident involving these networks could have a significant impact, those networks are treated as critical infrastructure. (p. 45)

Not least after the 9/11 attacks, there is an increasing demand for the protection of a large variety of vulnerable sectors and systems against violent terrorist acts. These include such risky arteries as airports, seaports, central railroad stations, energy utilities, mines, oil fields, gas fields and other major facilities, which epitomize critical nodes in (inter) national infrastructures. For example, huge security companies like G4S provide a flexible and specialized workforce involved in airport security. Moreover, such multinationals assist managers of airports and other facilities with training, constancy and expertise that covers risk inventories, security planning, logistics and 'integrated' responses, both manned and technological, to ensure continuity and performance.

Most recently, G4S proudly advertised itself as the official provider of private security services during the London 2012 Olympic Games. London's venues were temporarily elevated to the status of 'critical infrastructure' due to the political and economic impact of a potential terrorist attack. *The Guardian* (20 June 2012) even reports that 'the company which already enlisted to provide 2000 guards, ... upped its contribution supplying more than 10 000 and managing and training for 23 700 personnel – including the military. For this, it billed the organizers ... an extra £200 m, the contract more than tripled from £84 m to £284 m'.⁷ Yet, the protection of critical infrastructures goes well beyond the physical environment. Large-scale security companies are also active in identifying and countering

digital threats. Among these are poor ICT practices and weak cyber control systems, which may lead to hackers and viruses entering sensitive networks and databases. Private experts employed by Securitas, for example, constantly try to develop appropriate solutions in the fast-paced field of telecommunications. The most discernible outcome of these developments is ‘state-corporate symbiosis’ (O’Reilly, 2010) embodied in a hybrid policing marketplace.

Investigation and forensic services

A niche segment of the security industry is covered by ‘investigative and forensic services’. Although most of this market consists of small- to medium-sized detective agencies (Gill and Hart, 1997), Securitas and G4S also operate strong investigative subdivisions. Their clients are often business executives who prefer internal problem solving rather than calling the police because disclosure of (white-collar) crimes can result in damage to the corporate image and stock values. Moreover, corporations – being concerned with issues of confidentiality, flexibility, loss recovery, minimizing future risks and administering informal disciplinary punishments rather than bringing criminal charges through trials – may have goals other than the criminal justice system (Shearing and Stenning, 1983). In addition, top consultants like Control Risks⁸ gather intelligence from companies and governments all over the world with the aim of informing clients about the potential threats associated with trading partners and personnel (O’Reilly, 2010). Insurance specialists assist customers with lawsuit preparation and investigations into frauds, thefts and suspicious accidents, whereas certified forensic accountants look into (suspected) financial malpractice and offer anti-corruption training.

Although insurance companies, banks, lawyers and commercial businesses form the primary client base of private investigation services, the public sector is increasingly making use of their expertise. Multinational security and consultancy firms frequently assist government agencies at the transnational level. This assistance may involve ‘mixed’ government-business alliances created with the object of preserving vested political and economic interests. As O’Reilly and Ellison (2006) stress:

to presume that high policing is only applicable to state-based authority would be to neglect other sources of private authority, most especially those which are increasingly emergent at the global/transnational level. Policing initiatives, whether public or private, nation-state or transnationally oriented, may share the fundamental objective of high policing: the protection of specific arrangements of power from those deemed to pose a threat. However, while public high policing protects against the subversion of the state, private high policing protects against the subversion of the client. While predominantly concerned with the protection of corporate interests, the scope of private high policing activity increasingly encompasses the interests of nation states, supranational organizations and non-governmental organizations. At the transnational level, this is reflected in the shift away from state-centric security networks towards more complex ‘nodal’ structures of security governance ... within which private high policing forms are progressively important. (p. 647)

It thus seems that distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ as well as ‘local’ and ‘global’ spheres of policing and security are becoming increasingly blurred.



Government support services

A similar blurring of boundaries appears in the segment of ‘government support services’. Both G4S and Securitas proffer ‘integrated’ security packages are customizable to their clientele’s specific needs. However, such packages can go much further than supplying commonplace manned guarding and technical solutions in combination. In countries like the United States and South Africa (though not in Europe), it is not uncommon that established private security firms, insurance companies and local businesses endow public police officers with free training and material support (Grabosky, 2007). There is even evidence of patrol cars marked with the message ‘this vehicle is equipped by “XYZ company”’ on the back (Ayling *et al.*, 2009, p. 175).

This trend towards commercially driven government support in the field of criminal justice and policing is also visible in the provision of foot patrols. In the Netherlands, we can find privately employed street coaches who go on their beat to keep an eye on (unruly) youngsters. As such, they occupy a middle ground between security guards and youth workers. Another Dutch project is the private secondment of so-called ‘extraordinary investigating officers’ (*buitengewoon opsporingsambtenaren*) to municipalities. These staff bear a family resemblance to low-ranked police community support officers in England and Wales, but are not themselves police officers (Merrit, 2009). Instead, extraordinary investigating officers are employed as municipal law enforcers mandated to demand identification from citizens and issue fines if necessary. Some of them carry handcuffs, pepper spray and a baton.

A further ongoing development is the £200 million deal recently signed between G4S and the Lincolnshire police department (UK). Under this deal the multinational has been contracted to design, build and run the department with the assistance of 900 civilian workers who will deliver a range of service functions, including administering drug tests, maintaining cell blocks and managing the force’s vehicle fleet. The police officers stationed in the Lincolnshire department will continue to carry out their normal duties (*The Guardian*, 22 February 2012). Similarly, in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands we see G4S personnel playing a supporting role in operating and guarding custodial facilities as well as asylum seekers’ centres. This means private guards can join full-fledged riot squads to calm down a hostage situation in a prison outbreak. British policies have gone beyond those of the Netherlands by also handing over prison escorts, courtroom security and rehabilitation services to commercial operators (Resodihardjo, 2009). Furthermore, in Britain, G4S supports people, former detainees among them, in finding long-term employment.

The final state bastion that multinational private security touches is national defense. As its Website states, G4S supports ‘the successful deployment and engagement of armed forces at home and abroad’. In 2008, G4S Risk Management acquired the AmorGroup, which let the multinational into a new commercial path as a major supplier of landmine and unexploded ordnance clearance, ammunition destruction and small weapon abatement. Among other capabilities added to the G4S security pallet are the close protection of buildings, executives (politicians, ambassadors) and frontline personnel, kidnap and ransom negotiation, and driving courses in hostile countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan (*The Independent*, 21 March 2008). For G4S, the deal was lucrative as doing business in conflict and war zones generally increases profit margins.

Explaining Private Security

Academics have proposed a myriad of factors that account for the growth of private security worldwide (van Steden, 2007). Although it is difficult to distinguish between cause and effect, we will briefly explore those factors that have contributed to a private security industry that spans the world. A first important explanation for the expansion of the industry concerns large-scale changes in spatial ordering (Shearing *et al*, 1980). The urban environment is increasingly coming to be dominated by new forms of communal space such as fashionable shopping malls, restricted clubs and walled residential areas that are publicly accessible but privately owned and managed. However, the growth of mass property should not be taken as *the* pivotal explanatory factor underlying private security growth. The appearance of mass private property – and wider (semi-)closed communal spaces – in the European Union is relatively limited compared with the United States (van Steden and Jones, 2010). Moreover, the mass private property thesis does not satisfactorily explain why multinational security companies especially are successful at penetrating sectors formally owned by the state.

Second, a common sense explanation for the proliferation of private security is the upsurge of crime. However, interestingly enough, the industry started to flourish only after crime figures had stabilized or dropped in many countries. It is therefore tempting to speculate that the appearance of private security companies contributed to maintaining crime at a stable level, which would explain why the industry's growth does not synchronize with actual crime rates. A better explanation may be a decreasing acceptance of risk and damage. In Britain and elsewhere, policymakers have been faced with what Crawford *et al* (2005) refer to as a 'reassurance paradox': 'as general crime risks have declined, so perceptions of victimization risks have increased' (p. 2). Despite falling crime rates, anxieties about crime and anti-social behaviour have continued to grow. This suggests that the growth of private security may have more to do with generalized insecurity than crime problems. Governments can only guarantee protection to a certain degree.

Relatedly, society demands higher quality from policing and security providers. Many citizens and organizations are critical of public police, health care and social support services, which are endemically underfunded. Profiting from these fiscal pressures, McDonaldized security solutions promise pragmatic, comparatively cheap approaches to achieve the desired services. In turn, the government accepts and even encourages two-tiered – public and private – forms of protection that gradually interpenetrate the social fabric of society. Garland (1996) has used the term 'responsibilization' policies to denote processes whereby the government acknowledges its limitations, and seeks to devolve responsibility to other agencies and individuals. Private security firms are the beneficiaries in these debates over responsibilities and capabilities for the effective and efficient governance of policing and security. The neo-liberal thrust towards 'contracting-out' and 'hiving-off' state responsibilities to the private sector thus appears as a fundamental explanation for the dazzling boom of global private security. This happens due to the interplay between lobbying and political decision making, but in the end, only sovereign states and their national parliaments can decide whether private security companies can be permitted and licensed to carry out their responsibilities – and, if so, how far their mandates should reach.



Simultaneously, there is remarkably little public scrutiny of the radical reforms in policing and security we are witnessing today. Citizens and politicians alike hardly voice any criticism of or resistance to what may lead to a ‘hollowing out’ (Rhodes, 1994) of public services in the long run. Similarly, detailed empirical studies into the public value and vocational ethos of private security services are virtually non-existent. So far, Shefer and Liebling (2008), on the basis of comparing public and private prisons in the United Kingdom, cautiously conclude that privatization can have a positive effect on relationships between staff and prisoners. Dutch research furthermore underlines that police officers and private security guards closely resemble each other in how they prioritize their motivations and values (van der Wal *et al.*, 2012). What is striking, however, is that mutual perceptions show much greater differences, with police officers looking down on security guards and security guards looking up to police officers. Although these observations do not necessarily confirm that privatization (and in a wider sense, pluralization) is a wise route to follow, they do indicate that the public sector does not have an exclusive claim on high morals and good practices.

Opportunities and Challenges

The rise of McDonaldized private security as just described potentially has far-reaching consequences for the governance of policing and the wider safety and security architectures. From the perspective of public interests and preserving the rights and liberties of the citizens, private security poses both significant opportunities and challenges. The most important issues are outlined in the next sections.

Opportunities

Proponents of commercial security companies argue that public–private partnerships will enhance the overall capacity to control crime and insecurity. This enhancement, when targeted properly, may reduce hazardous situations at global, national and local levels. By exchanging knowledge between public and private sectors, then, a better mutual understanding and use of best working practices can be achieved (van Dijk and de Waard, 2000). As such, opportunities are: (i) greater efforts on behalf of the private sector in forestalling crime, terrorism and other risks; (ii) improved coordination of public and private organizations within security networks; and (iii) ensuring more effectiveness in the deployment of information sources of all organizations involved.

Another line of thought views private security as a means to advance police performance through competition. As Noaks (2000) says, ‘the police are likely to feel particularly threatened by private competitors with the potential to offer a more focused and apparently effective service’ (p. 157). If the general public perceives private security performance as better than that of the police, citizens and organizations would perhaps be unwilling to pay more taxes. This competition, in turn, can have positive effects on the institutional inertia and bureaucratic delay associated with public police. A more rational and equitable distribution of policing and security governance may even be possible if the private security industry takes over ‘peripheral’ police functions such as back office duties, handling emergency calls, prison escorts and traffic control.

Challenges

The reverse side of the competition argument is that it can degrade into counterproductive tendencies to mistrust, lack of commitment and discontinuing cooperation. Moreover, an unequal distribution of policing and protection across society is a feasible outcome as soon as public and private sectors start to diverge. Solidarity within society may weaken, and governments will be severely hampered in their abilities to deliver core police and security tasks. Growth in preventive private policing on behalf of wealthy customers might also be accomplished by repressive public policing against poorer populations (Young, 1999).

Subsequently, the police will increasingly be unable to keep up with the innovations and productivity of the private security industry. This makes it conceivable that security companies will exert a powerful effect on police priorities, but not vice versa. Imagine that the popularity of private security solutions were to spark a decline in the willingness to report crime to the police. The search for, apprehension and interrogation of suspects by private security staff would steadily start to achieve wide acceptance, dampening the deterrent effects of criminal laws, while privacy and the legal rights of citizens would come under severe pressure (Sklansky, 2006). Such a scenario is not unrealistic, as it is already possible to involve G4S at every stage after a crime is committed.

The powerful dominance of only a few global private security players can result in unhealthy power concentrations. Critics of private security warn that the current lack of appropriate public accountability and the impossibility of drawing firm lines between formal (state) and informal (voluntary) regulations may encourage ‘governing *through* private security’ (O’Connor *et al.*, 2008, p. 208; emphasis in the original). In other words, multinational companies become shadow states themselves. This is worrying as senior industry executives, despite their confident self-promotion in the media, display grave doubts and moral ambivalence about the quality of their own personnel, the problem of cowboy traders in the market, and purchasers being dissatisfied with the mis-buying of security products and services (Thumala *et al.*, 2011). The most compelling question arising here is what private security is selling, exactly: a social good, an emotion, a (false) promise, reassurance that can never be fully realized? There is still much work to be done in cementing the industry’s legitimacy (see White, 2012).

Conclusion

One of the state’s core tasks is to protect its population from crime, terrorism and public disorder. However, over the last 25 years or so, a declining willingness to run risks, discontent with public services, budget constraints and responsabilization policies have simulated the demand for private security. The industry is responding by supplying a wide array of attractive security solutions and seems to be abreast of the public sector in innovative capacity and performance. Most strikingly, we are witnessing a McDonaldisation of private security as colossal multinational companies like G4S and Securitas are striving to deliver predictable, efficient, calculable and controllable products and services worldwide.

A disapproving reaction to this trend – such as efforts to curtail the activities of private security companies – makes little sense. Because the industry has expanded so much, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, its size and impact can no longer be rendered marginal.



Multinational companies are here to stay. As a consequence, it is better to be realistic about the limitations of governments and the interdependence between public and private sectors. The search to strike a more optimal balance in crime control and security governance is of the utmost importance in the years to come. Governments will only be able to maintain their leading role in matters of policing and security if they break through current resistance to change. Therefore, public authorities should continue to implement innovative public–private partnerships, stricter regulations and higher training standards in order to better handle the challenges private security companies pose to ‘law and justice’ criteria. The future of policing and security governance, in an environment where the needs of order maintenance change on a regular basis, demands no less.

Notes

- 1 Details can be obtained from: www.coess.eu.
- 2 De Waard’s study listed Britain, Germany, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Ireland, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Finland and Greece as EU member states. On 1 May 2004, the EU member states grew from 15 to 25 as Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia entered the Union.
- 3 Romania and Bulgaria are two newcomers within the European Union. The additional seven countries are Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.
- 4 Details can be obtained from: www.g4s.com.
- 5 Details can be obtained from: www.securitas.com.
- 6 Details can be obtained from: www.academi.com.
- 7 However, G4S failed to provide enough security guards to the Olympic Games. This sparked political outrage and led to the deployment of extra military personnel in London (*The Guardian*, 24 July 2012).
- 8 Details can be obtained from: www.controlrisks.com.

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