



PRIVATE SECURITY

Introduction

Ethnographies of Private Security

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This introduction emphasizes the value of an anthropological lens within the research on private security. Although much scholarly work has been conducted on private security throughout the past decades, anthropological attention for this subject was somewhat delayed. Yet, the works that have emerged from this discipline through ethnographic fieldwork have provided new and different types of insights, namely bottom-up understandings that explore the daily practices and performances of security and the experiences of the security actors themselves, that other disciplines can unquestionably draw from. As the introductory piece of this section, it also familiarizes the four articles that constitute various “ethnographies of private security.”

■ **KEYWORDS:** anthropology, ethnography, policing, private security

Whether in the supermarket, university, airport, or shopping mall, we constantly encounter private security agents in our daily lives. This growing presence of private security across the globe has received ample scholarly attention over the past decades. We have increasing insight in the social realities of companies such as Blackwater and Securitas, and we have begun to understand the dynamics behind the growth of this large industry and its social, economic, and political consequences.

Within academia, the fields of political science, international relations, criminology, and international law have dominated the analytical quest to unravel the workings of private security actors. Studies within international relations have focused on the implications for state sovereignty and authority (Avant 2004, 2005; Leander 2005, 2013; Singer 2003), the role of private security companies in the domains of humanitarian aid (Spearin 2001), how companies engage in identity work and self-framing (Berndtsson 2011; Franke and von Boemcken 2011; Joachim and Schneiker 2012a), and the role of gender discourses and masculinities (Higate 2012; Joachim and Schneiker 2012b). In the field of international (humanitarian) law, scholars have addressed the legal frameworks in which such companies can and cannot operate (Boghosian 2005; Joh 2005; Zarate 1998; Kinsey 2005; Schreier and Caparani 2005; Thorburn 2010) and the crucial role that national and international regulation plays in determining such legal parameters (Berg 2003; Cockayne 2008; Sarre and Prenzler 1999).



Another field that has contributed significantly to the evolving conceptualization of private security is criminology, where the term “private policing” is more commonly used. This research includes canonical contributions by Clifford Shearing, Margaret Farnell, and Philip Stenning (1980), Shearing and Stenning (1983), and Nigel South (1988), and the field continues to generate the bulk of work on private policing. These studies, which often employ a quantitative approach, have analyzed the occupational standards and cultures of private security officers (Berg 2010; Button 2007; Manzo 2010; Rigakos 2002), larger processes of crime prevention and management (Johnston 1992; McManus 1995; White and Gill 2013), the changing nature of public and private spaces (Kempa et al. 2004; Shearing and Wood 2003; Wakefield 2003), and how such entities interact with state authorities and other policing actors (Crawford and Lister 2006; Diphooorn and Berg 2014; Jones and Newburn 1998; Noaks 2000). In addition, a more sociological perspective within criminology has addressed normative ideas of private security consumption and whether policing should be seen as a public good (Goold et al. 2010; Loader 1999, 2000; Loader and Walker 2007; Spitzer 1987). Working from these various disciplinary approaches, these scholars have produced an enormous volume of work on private security, and in the past two years, two encompassing and insightful edited volumes have emerged that bring these various perspectives together, namely the *Handbook of Private Security Studies* (Abrahamsen and Leander 2015) and the *Routledge Research Companion to Security Outsourcing* (Berndtsson and Kinsey 2016).

This special section builds directly on this extensive scholarly literature on private security, but aims to emphasize insights being produced within anthropology, a discipline that began to focus on the growth of private security somewhat later. Although there are various ethnographic accounts of security providers operating outside of the state, such as gangs or militias (e.g., Baker 2008, 2010; Buur 2006; Goldstein 2005, 2012; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Harnischfeger 2003; Jensen 2008; Pratten and Sen 2007; Rodgers 2006), an ethnographic focus on commercial security entities (including companies such as G4S and various security consultants) were extremely limited until very recently. This has changed in the past few years with the emergence of a few ethnographic accounts that focus specifically on private security from the point of view of the security actors (e.g., Diphooorn 2016; Konopinski 2014; Stockmarr 2015), numerous articles that depict how these actors operate in particular localities—for example, Daniel Goldstein’s (2015) analysis of the performance of local sovereignty in Bolivia, Erella Grassiani and Lior Volinz’s (2015) piece on how policing (re)produces different audiences in East Jerusalem, and Paul Higate’s (2011, 2012) insights on gender issues among private contractors—and an edited volume that specifically focuses on the role of private security companies in Africa (Higate and Utas 2017). Combined, these anthropological contributions provide more (local) insights into how private security employees perceive and experience their own security practices, how daily interactions with other security providers influence power dynamics, and how citizens experience the growing presence of private security. This anthropological lens not only supplies a more local and bottom-up perspective of private security, but has also contributed greatly to larger conceptual debates on key issues, such as sovereignty, citizenship, belonging, and exclusion.

In this section, we extend this focus by highlighting the innovative insights and advantages of this growing anthropological scope. For decades, the method of ethnographic fieldwork defined the discipline of anthropology. More specifically, participant observation was regarded as the hallmark of the discipline and the method that distinguished anthropologists from other qualitative researchers. However, we believe, with others (Ingold 2008), that anthropology is not solely defined by ethnography or participant observation; the questions we ask and the conceptual insights anthropology offers are equally important. Yet we value the ethnographic method

here as particularly important to understand how private security agents give meaning to their work within the national, historical, and social contexts they live in and the power relations they are part of. It also shows us the ways private security work relates to issues of sovereignty, gender, and power.

This special section is based on contributions by authors who have conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork and have used participant observation as a key method to uncover how private security actually works. Each article in this section highlights a different facet of the enormous and diverse private security industry and is based in a different locality. The first contribution, by Francesco Colona and Tessa Diphorn, analyses the power dynamics between local security providers in Nairobi, Kenya. By focusing on the dynamics between private security companies, Kenyan police officers, and various resident initiatives, the authors use their empirical data to show the dominant role of the state police, with private security providers relegated to the role of acting as their “eyes, ears, and wheels”. This, they argue, counters much of the literature on African policing that tends to interpret the growth and prominence of the private security industry as an indication of state weakness or state failure. Using rich ethnographic material, the authors emphasize the multitude and continuously changing dynamics between security providers that move beyond frequently used abstract frameworks of “security assemblages” (Abrahamsen and Williams 2010) and “security networks” (Dupont 2004).

The second contribution, by Maya Mynster Christensen, brings us to Sierra Leone. In this piece, Mynster Christensen explores the practices and processes through which Sierra Leonean ex-soldiers and ex-militia members have been engaged in private security provision for the US government in the aftermath of the civil war in their country. The author focuses on the experiences of these “ex-servicemen,” who are (waiting to be) deployed in Iraq, thereby also demonstrating the globalized nature of security networks. In addition to understanding how militarized networks are transformed in a postwar context, this article uncovers, using the concept “shadow soldiering,” how these networks gradually morph into new ways of blurring of the public with the private and the visible with the invisible.

The final two articles, by Paul Higate and Erika Robb Larkins, explore embodiment as a dimension of private security that is often overlooked. Higate’s contribution zooms in on the domain of private security training for close protection officers in two distinct localities, namely the United States and Eastern Europe. He employs an explicitly embodied methodology to analyze how armed close protection officers translate abstract ideas of security to material security practices. Higate aims to show the crucial role of embodiment in doing ethnographic research and reflects on his role as both researcher and participant in the trainings. In so doing, he offers an explicit focus on the embodied dimension of intersubjectivity that is lacking in many fields outside of anthropology.

Erika Robb Larkins also focuses on “embodied security work,” reflecting on her own embodied approach to understanding security practices in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Identifying various types of bodies and exploring how security is experienced as a particular form of embodied labor by guards, she argues that security work itself depends on performatively subduing different kinds of bodies, both those of potential threats and those of the guards themselves. This analysis highlights the racialized dimensions of security work (see also Diphorn 2015; Kempa and Singh 2008; Samara 2010), and the extent to which security practices are always directed towards a dangerous Other.

Across the different themes and localities, the ethnographic approach of these authors unites the various contributions of this section. The authors have all spent a substantial time doing extensive, in-depth research in their respective fieldwork sites, conducting numerous interviews with the relevant actors and participating in various activities, such as trainings, social events,

and patrols, that constitute the private security domain. This detailed engagement with everyday security practices and the meanings attributed to these practices by on-the-ground private security professionals across diverse cultural, political, and economic contexts all add to our understanding of such practices as they are performed by private agents across the globe. It is precisely this dimension that an ethnographic approach uncovers, namely, how daily security practices are performed and how various, often conflicting, perceptions on security are created and connected. Other approaches, such as the ones we refer to above, have mostly relied on policy analysis, statistics, and a top-down approach to understand and conceptualize security. And although the anthropological lens may have developed later, we argue that it not only builds on and contributes to existing approaches, but also provides something different from which other disciplines can draw from.

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