

Research towards alternative futures: policing in practice

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[Reflections added post-conference are included in square brackets]

Today I will discuss what I consider to be two of the most important areas for research in the domain of public-private partnerships in policing. [As I have been listening to our presentations today, it has become clearer to me that my presentation is about the kinds of research we need to do -- what we need to find out more about -- to help us achieve *clarity* on certain matters that are of greatest importance to our achievement of effective partnerships.] Let me justify what I think are the most important things for us to find out about by very quickly recapping for you what we already seem to know a lot about:

1. *The face of policing is forever changed:*

No longer a public monopoly, there are literally no functions performed by public policing agencies that are not also, somewhere and sometimes, performed by the private security industry (see especially: Stenning 2000). This is very true at the local level of generic crime control policing activities, and it is equally true with respect to macro-level "national security" issues.

The precise ways in which the balance is tilted between public and private actors varies by location -- and, in broad strokes, we can say that here in Canada we are somewhere in the middle range of private security activity relative to other nations around the globe. Many societies that are struggling to entrench their democratic systems and, importantly, narrow the gap between the very rich and the very poor are those with the highest ratio of private to public security agencies -- and I'm thinking here of cases like South Africa and Brazil, wherein states simply do not have the wherewithal to extend not only political peace but also some semblance of economic and social peace to most of their members.

The importance of economic and social peace in accounting for shifts in policing practices is underscored in the case of the United States of America -- which, although its' democratic institutions are well established and apparently well functioning, public demands for safety and protection from predatory and property crimes continues to skyrocket, fueling a much larger private security industry and in our own nation.

2. *This is not a new phenomenon:*

One of the things that historical research has confirmed is that the administration of public safety and security being undertaken by a singular public police organization

amounts to a historical anomaly rather than the norm. This is to say that "public safety and security" -- which we can think of as being "policing" broadly defined -- has throughout history normally been, for the most part, a complex and diffuse set of processes involving both state and non-state actors. And indeed, if we go back only 200 years, we find ourselves in a situation in which the majority of actors involved in human safety and security were private.

3. Policing provides an excellent window into shifts in political and economic life:

There is one very important definitional issue to emphasize -- not just for shock value or to give us all a cheeky surprise -- but important for what it tells us about what changes in policing signal about changes in how we think about and tend to do the business of collective living and governance more generally. And that is that the very concept of "policing" has its origins in the term "political economy".

That's to say that policing and political economy once meant exactly the same thing from the perspective of government legislators, juridical theorists and academics, and, indeed, educated people generally. That's to say that, prior to the rise of a modern, liberal, industrial, and capitalist society, policing literally meant all steps undertaken by the government and private actors to ensure the well functioning of markets (see especially: Kempa 2008; Neocleous 1997). And that was simply because we believed that the growth of markets would yield sufficient prosperity and goods so as to undercut the causes of crime and other antisocial behavior. That's basically what a cameralist or mercantalist model of political economy was all about.

Let me just tell you that it was with the rise of the liberal capitalist political economy, in which we began to think about the economy as something which is best left to run pretty much independently from state interference, that it literally became possible for us to start thinking about policing as being about the maintenance of political peace -- independent from economic or social peace.

This had everything to do with the expansion of the notions of the public versus the private in our systems for law and governance (Foucault 2007). And it was at this point in our transition from one system of political economy to another -- from a cameralist to a capitalist order in which various streams of liberalism which represented different recipes for how best the state ought to minimally interfere in the business of the market -- that we saw the rise of a whole new institution for doing the business of policing: the public police championed by Sir Robert Peel both at home in the Metropole and throughout the colonies.

I'm underlying all of this theory to you to underscore the point that shifts in who does the business of policing and under whose authority are phenomenally good indicators of broader shifts in political and economic life. That's to say, studying how policing is changing provides a wonderful window into understanding how our broader systems for politics and economy are changing. And, I would submit to you, it is this that we know a

fair good about in the academy. We in academia have come up with pretty good theoretical accounts of what the resurgence of the private security industry and various forms of public-private partnerships in the forms that they have so far principally been realized seems to tell us about what's going on in the global political economy. I am sure it comes as no surprise to you, that we are very worried by our own conclusions.

When we take a look at the rise of gated communities and other forms of exclusionary neo-communal space wherein the wealthy are able to secure themselves and their possessions from the great majority of people who are impoverished and in many cases desperate, we are immediately reminded of a bygone feudal era wherein political rights and a decent standard of living were guaranteed for a very small number of people indeed (see especially: Shearing and Stenning 1983). We in academia get very worried about the degree to which the well-to-do who are sequestered within their enclaves of privilege -- and the degree to which they are literally closed off from much if any meaningful communication with the masses of marginalized persons as they move through privileged spaces not only at home, not only for immediate leisure and local work, but also as they move to travel throughout the planet on secured vessels into secured resort spaces (Kempa and Singh in press). We already know, from decades of sociological research, that taking a group of people and isolating them produces all manner of misinformed opinions and indeed strange worldviews that are cut off from reality. This kind of theorizing is very well developed in academic research, and it is very worrying indeed.

The rebirth of the language of partnership in public policing bodies -- sometimes associated with the language of community policing -- also connects with a very interesting story about the decline of welfare politics and rise of neoliberal politics, wherein states acknowledge their practical and conceptual inabilities to govern the business of social life directly (O'Malley and Palmer 1996). Within this model, we often think more about government doing the steering of while leaving the business of rowing to other actors, and really getting involved directly when things come unhinged at the local level (Hindess 2001). Many people read community policing in these terms, and understand the parallel rise of paramilitarism and specialized public police units in these terms.

Let me end this review here about what we do know by emphasizing that this kind of dystopic future -- wherein a wealthy minority sequesters itself in fear a way from the problems of the masses and out of the sight lines of the current drastic threats to human security that face us (most notably climate change and all of the conflicts which will come through the scarcity of resources coming around our not too distant corner) while the police are doomed to a kind of disaster clean up squad role -- is only a potentiality. It is the potential outcome of poorly coordinated public-private partnerships, and unquestioning growth -- or growth of any old type -- across the private security industry and indeed in public policing. More is not always better.

4. We can assume that no right-thinking public or private policing actor wants such a future:

The good news is, where we listen to what people are saying at this conference here in Toronto, and we review statements -- both written and verbal -- made by public policing actors and representatives of the private security industry, it is pretty clear that nobody seeks such dystopic futures. That's to say, that everybody concerned, including those within the private security industry, are speaking a responsible language about making sure that human security continues to serve as a public good -- one which is guaranteed not only to the denizens of fortified enclaves of privilege but also to all citizens of states who are living up to their obligations under the social contract.

Public police actors are talking about the need to build effective partnerships with private security agencies so as to move beyond the well-known limits to public policing: the truth that we have known since the Robert Peel that the police working on their own will never effectively prevent crime owing to the fact that they simply do not have the eyes, nor the resources, nor the legal authority, to maintain an unremitting watch over collective goings-on.

Conversely, private security authorities are speaking a language of responsible public engagement: of course, they are directly serving the interests of those who pay them, but they are promising to do so within the limits of democracy and, in many cases, going further than this to stress that they intend to make a contribution to community safety and collective benefit.

This review of our worries that come from the existing academic research combined with our statements of our laudatory objectives leads me directly to discuss two priority areas for research: holes in our knowledge base that we must fill precisely towards achieving our laudatory practical aims (in addition to fleshing out the kind of abstract political economic analysis that people like me are interested in doing in our offices at the University at two o'clock in the morning).

5. Public police and partnerships:

We all want to do it, and we all want to do it well.

The trouble facing us is of course in the detail around that. Throughout Canada and here in the province of Ontario, there exist many "mixed messages" for what exactly policing is and who ought to be contributing what to it. Our legislation at the Federal, Provincial, and Municipal levels tends to talk about policing largely in terms of the structure, regulation, and funding of the public police agency. From that perspective, policing is largely the business of empowering yet controlling and funding a public policing agency.

And yet statements made by members of government, and within other pieces of crime prevention legislation, speak in terms of community safety, quality of life, and other phrases that capture wider understandings of "human security". We fund and regulate very many other crime prevention initiatives locally, Provincially, and Federally, but

these are too often dealt with separately from our existing legal and regulatory apparatus for public policing. Police regulatory bodies -- most notably Police Services Boards and various streams of complaints procedure organizations often speak in one voice with their Chiefs in terms of a broader language of community partnership, and yet are unsure of their authority to work beyond the public police where they see fit. Where they may do so with the blessing of their Chiefs and other commanding officers, they are sometimes met with bitter opposition from Police Federations, who themselves are sending out their understanding of what policing ought best to be at this point in history.

How do we reconcile these different visions for public safety across Canada? One strategy, probably a bad one, or at least a wasteful one in that we have already done this, is to ask the academics for a plan for us all to implement. We will only tell you again that it must be about partnerships. Perhaps we can participate in discussions with you about different models for partnership that have been tried around the world, and note some of the successes, and can also repeat our dystopic story about the development of global apartheid which I have laid out above as something to keep in mind as what we want to avoid. But, it's then really a matter for you to then decide which vision is yours to pursue for the future.

From there, academics can help you with the research that you will need to do to achieve your vision. At the very top of the list of important questions will be to determine what exactly rank and file members of your organizations make of the new reality of partnership, multilateralised, or public-private policing and crime control.

- How do they understand it?
- what do they think they can best contribute to it? and
- are they in step with police management on these issues?

If the rank-and-file are not speaking the same language or looking at the world with the same set of eyes as management, this will tell us something about what kinds of recruitment and training adjustments, legal reforms, and funding structure changes we need to see to achieve our objectives for effective democratic partnerships.

The little bit of research that I have seen on this topic, and my own anecdotal observations in the field, are not encouraging in this domain. In the national police leadership survey on crime prevention through social development, Mac Rae et al. have shown that even police officers who are central players in most crime prevention initiatives are often are unaware of the role they are supposed to play in a particular program (2005). If left unchecked, this lack of clarity (on the part of the partner program or the police) can, and often does, lead to the breakdown of partnerships between the program and the police (McCrae et al. 2005; Schneider 2007)

6. The need to understand more about the private security industry:

Previous commentators have tended to assume that private security promotes the client's interest first, ahead of more broadly public interests, with the emphasis on preventing and reducing loss at private sites rather than on apprehending and punishing those who violate the law (see for example, Shearing and Stenning 1983). Private policing agents are thus thought to exhibit the 'future-oriented' thinking and behaviour associated with the logics of risk minimization/profit maximization pursued by their employers. However, it remains the case that grounded field research on the private security market is in its infancy.

What we do know from the few studies that have been undertaken, is that some streams of the private security industry on the ground are far more punitive and reactionary, and sometimes authoritarian and racist than its own managers and bosses would like.

In particular, I can direct you to some of the recent work of George Rigakos (2002), and his innovative study of a major Toronto-based contract private security company. This is one of the few existing studies that does address the issue of private security operational practices and occupational subculture, doing so through ground-level research based upon ethnography-inspired methods that include participant observation and interviews with frontline private security agents. Rigakos finds that Intelligarde agents assume "parapolicing" responsibilities, identities and attitudes at the level both of rhetoric and of actual practice. At the level of practice, Intelligarde's private parapolicing functions extend to "clearing crack houses, processing evictions, and even disrupting the business of 'drug gangs'" in Toronto's inner city neighbourhoods, through such means as surveillance and making full arrests of perpetrators 'caught in the act' (27). From interviews with ground-level private security agents, Rigakos characterizes this parapolicing mission as "crime fighting within a 'wannabe' culture": private agents who identify with, and aspire to engage in, romanticized notions of 'exciting' careers in public policing (30).

Building upon this emergent picture of private policing culture, grounded empirical studies of private security services by both Micucci (1998) and Manzo (2004), again in the North American context, underline the point that security forces are not necessarily harmonious wholes (see also: Wakefield 2003). As in the case of public policing agencies (see for example: Reuss-Ianni and Ianni 1983; Bayley 1994), private security organizations may also be segmented into groups that engage and promote distinct worldviews and work styles not always consistent with the preferred objectives and goals either of the security firm or of the security client. These authors take the further helpful step of compiling their data into typologies of private security agents.

In my own research in South Africa -- undertaken in collaboration with a colleague at Ryerson University -- Anne-Marie Singh -- many of these phenomena are replicated, and we further found that it was the most authoritarian officer type who progressed through the ranks of South African private security companies. This suggests that the worldview of many employees of the private security industry would seem to be at loggerheads with

their own management's stated desires to make a contribution to the collective good of public safety. This has obvious implications for the future recruitment and training strategies, along with promotion strategies, pursued by the private security industry and how we attempt to regulate their contribution to public safety.

[Postscript:

On the question of whether or not more powers should be given to the private security industry:

All of this relates back to the public-private divide in western systems of law. Changing the balance between public and private policing agencies would ultimately require a rethinking and redefinition of various forms of property in law. There are many options from around the world that could be considered, but, this would be a question to be worked out through looking at what is working well on the ground at home, and then going to the law books to support what we already see to be working well in terms of pilot projects.

Also, more needs to be known about the purported intentions of the private security industry to contribute to the broader public good before we give them more powers. For example, a transnational security company that enables the extraction of resources from a developing/unstable country -- do they have any concern to promote any kind of broader security in that country, or merely extract their resources/profits? Probably, some companies will have good intentions but will report that they cannot implement them because of the "free rider" problem wherein other companies who do not behave in a socially responsible manner will be able to extract their resources and produce their goods for lesser cost. This opens up the question of governmental regulation to manipulate investment conditions in such a fashion to level the playing field.

This comes back to the broadest question for government regulation of the private security industry: to what degree does the government want to get involved in regulating capital prospecting/growth? This is probably the foundational question for governance into our next several decades of human security questions and governance more broadly. The two major schools of thought on this are: (1) that government should not regulate growth (by placing controls upon capital prospecting) but should help to teach consumers to make enlightened choices; (2) that some form of governmental activism to tame markets will be necessary. These mechanisms are multiple and I would be interested in seeing the different philosophies and detailed plans around this on the part of the major political parties. I myself have not made up my mind pending evidence one way or the other as to efficacy of different approaches]

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