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Private Agency and the Definition of Public Security Concerns: The Role of Private Military Companies

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Private Agency and the Definition of Public Security Concerns: * The Role of Private Military Companies¹

“We make American military doctrine”
Ed Soyster,
Military Professional Resources, Inc²

According to *The Economist*, the war by the coalition of the willing in Iraq was the first “privatised war.”³ There are indeed impressive changes in the weight of the private sector. Where as in the second Gulf war of 1992 the ratio of private contractors to soldiers was estimated to 1-to-60, it had grown to 1-to-10 in Bosnia, 1-to-2 in Kosovo and it is estimated to have been even higher during the latest Iraq war.⁴ The annual revenue of the private military industry has increased from Z55.6 bn in 1990 to Z100 bn in 2000 and it was expected to double again and reach Z202 bn by 2010.⁵ Estimates of the number of conflicts involving “mercenaries” confirm the trend. 15 entries for the forty years period between 1950 and 1989 became and 80 for the ten year period between 1990 and 2000.⁶ This change reflects the development of “A Market for Force” where a “Private Military Industry” is offering services.⁷ “Outsourcing”, “private-public partnerships” and “privatizations” are shaping not only economic activities, but are also the “unstoppable trend” in the military.⁸ It is not new that private contractors accompany and support armed forces. New and changing is the “scope, location and criticality of that support.”⁹ In a characteristically immodest, but probably accurate, statement the CEO of DynCorp Paul Lombardi, tells *Fortune* “you could fight without us, but it would be difficult.”¹⁰

This paper discusses the implications of the rise of private military companies (PMCs¹¹) for state authority. More precisely it is a paper about how the impact of PMCs on state authority has been and can be assessed. It makes two arguments. The first is that there are two relatively common ways of missing the significance of PMCs for state (and particularly Western state) authority and that is to neglect either the economics or the politics of PMCs and their activities. To appreciate the impact of PMCs on state authority it is necessary to take a “political economy approach” which keeps both in focus. This leads to the second point. There is a varied, rich and interesting political economy literature which has kept both in focus, and acknowledged that the rise of PMCs matters for state authority, including state authority including in the West.

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¹ CeMISS support for the wider project within which this paper has been formulated is gratefully acknowledged as is Mette Lykke Knudsen’s research assistance.

² Quoted in *The Economist* 8 July 1999.

³ *The Economist*, 11 June 2003.

⁴ Singer quoted in *Miami Herald*, 7 March 2003.

⁵ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 4).

⁶ (Musah and Fayemi 2000: Annexe; Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2002a: Annexe A).

⁷ (Singer 2003; Avant forthcoming).

⁸ (Cardinali 2001).

⁹ (Zamparelli 1999: 9).

¹⁰ “The Pentagon’s Private Army”, *Fortune* 3 March 2003.

¹¹ PMCs will be used in this paper to include provider, consulting and logistics firms working with military matters (also International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002b; borrowed from Singer 2003). The reasons for this definition will be further elaborated below. For the time being it might nonetheless be useful to indicate that the choice to include all three categories of firms is the blurred distinctions between the activities.

However, a crucial aspect of this impact is left aside or marginalised, namely the importance of PMCs in shaping public understandings security concerns.

These arguments are about how to conceptualise the relationship between state authority and the rise of PMCs, that is they are ultimately theoretical in nature. However, instead of presenting the ideas first at the level of social theory and then applying them to PMCs, this paper draws on the debate surrounding PMCs and their activities to present the ideas. It directly and concretely illustrates that the way you look matters for what you see and for the judgements you make and (this is the point) that some ways are more adequate than others. Most of the illustrations used are drawn from the US and UK cases. This is partly because privatisation there has gone further than elsewhere, but more significantly because more is known and subject to public debate there than elsewhere. However, this should not be read as indicating that this paper makes general claims about the overall effects of PMCs on state authority in UK or US, or even more ambitiously (transposing a discussion based on UK and/or the US) in the rest of the world. I think it would be important to make these kinds of generalisations. However, for that to be feasible far more empirical research than I have done here is needed. The illustrations are there to concretely drive home ideas about how we might think about authority relations. They are there to underline areas on which it would be important to focus research and for this purpose the fact that most illustration are drawn from the US and UK is of lesser relevance.

1. Two Roads to Underestimating the Significance of Private Military Companies as Security Actors

Although virtually everything about PMCs is contentious one thing seems not to be: its rapid growth. Whatever else observers have to say about the industry they tend to agree that it has grown very rapidly since the end of the cold war and continues to be one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Aggregate indicators were quoted in the introduction. They are clearly problematic since the industry is notoriously difficult to get indicators on and indicators should be taken as educated guesses. But they are corroborated by the general trend to outsource, privatize and develop public-private partnerships in most countries.¹² The extent and form of outsourcing policies have clearly varied by context. The UK was a forerunner. Thatcherism touched also the Ministry of Defence which not only privatized, but actually commercialized, its defence services starting already in 1979.¹³ Similarly the US has undergone profound changes. There has been a declared preference for “private solutions” in the defence restructuring plans.¹⁴ But most other Western countries have followed similar paths to a greater or lesser extent. Canada and Australia have outsourced logistics functions in ways similar to the UK.¹⁵ Germany had a restructuring plan for its armed forces, including increased outsourcing running between 2000-2004.¹⁶ In France, the socialists and the right have disagreed on most things, but not on the importance of continued defence privatization.¹⁷ Even Finland has outsourced parts of its military services and is planning to go further.¹⁸ This is what leads Andersen Consulting to

¹² (Kaldor, Albrecht et al. 1998).

¹³ (Edmonds 1998).

¹⁴ It is possible to cite e.g. *Federal Acquisition Circular 90-29* or Bureau of the *Budget Bulletin 55-4*. (Michaels 1999: 14).

¹⁵ (Singer 2003: 17).

¹⁶ “Germany looks to the Future”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 8 Aug. 2001.

¹⁷ “Fitter leaner forces for multipolar world”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 June 1997; “More privatization due”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 26 April 2000; “France’s Thatcherite Socialists”, *Foreign Report*, 29 July 1999.

¹⁸ “Finnish defence ministry considers leasing, outsourcing, and privatizing”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 23 Jan. 2002.

conclude that “outsourcing is the way of the future” as we are living through a privatization of the inner workings of military forces something of overseas contract are merely a spinoff from.¹⁹ In these conditions it might seem a tautology to insist that significance of PMCs as security actors warrants attention. But there are at least two significant and common ways of neglecting or denying this which this section will deal with.

A. The economists’ neglect of politics and security

The first way of downplaying the role of PMCs as independent security actors is to simply avoid talking about it. This is done in the rather substantial share of the literature on the subject by authors which on might label liberal (political) economists and by an even more substantial part of the commentators in the public debate who are interested above all in questions of efficiency and governance in the industry.

It is neither surprising nor unwarranted that this discussion should exist. One of the key motivations and justifications for privatizing and outsourcing is that it decreases costs and increases efficiency and quality.²⁰ The standard arguments have much in common with the discussions about outsourcing and privatizing in other sectors. They emphasize public sector mismanagement and private sector efficiency. They underline that soldiers are expensive and should be used to do things others cannot do better and cheaper. Finally they put weight on the growing importance of civilian (and off the shelf) technology, which makes outsourcing a matter of necessity as well as of keeping the costs of maintenance and training down. The industry lobby groups argue that far from enough has been privatized.²¹ In the US, BENS (Business Executives for National Security) recommends the Department of Defence to have the armed forces focus on their “core business”, outsource administration and logistics and BENS thinks it could save more in a year (Z15-30bn.) than it plans to do in five (Z 12 bn) if it went further in its outsourcing efforts.²² Resistance to these changes in the military and elsewhere is swept aside as the expected reaction of groups (in this case the military and/or nationalized military industries) with vested interests, deeply rooted traditions and jobs to defend.²³

It is only to be expected that the discussion should to some extent focus on how tenable these justifications are. Hence a key issue is how much is saved through privatization.²⁴ In this discussion questions have been raised about the efficiency of PMCs and the extent to which they are really more effective than in-house provision. “Market failures” are far from unheard of in the sector and are likely to become even more common.²⁵ Over-reliance may create defacto “private public monopolies” making public buyers dependent on private providers and incapable of cutting their contracts because they cannot do without the firms.²⁶ The extent to which the private firms actually rely on personnel trained in the military has been used to open up a debate

¹⁹ Quoted in *The Economist* 11 June 2003.

²⁰ Quote policy papers?? **fill in**

²¹ (Isenberg and Eland 2002).

²² BENS’ web pages WWW.BENS.COM contains both overviews of its activities and the reports and studies. These figures are taken from the general presentation of BENS’ “Tail to Tooth Commission” for reforming (read outsourcing and privatizing) defence strategies and policies.

²³ For example, (Michaels 1999), “Moving with the times”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 15 Nov. 2000; “A short term windfall...but at what price”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 17 Oct 2001; “Adjuncts or accountants” *The Economist* 1 June 2003.

²⁴ For overviews of the discussion see (Avant 2002; International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d; Singer 2003: chap. 10).

²⁵ (Bracken 2002).

²⁶ (Avant 2002).

about the extent to which this is a case of privatizing profits (from operations) and nationalizing the costs (of training). There has also been debate surrounding the degree to which cheating on contracts and close links to politics make private firms as expensive if not more so than the military itself.²⁷ In particular the US use of so called “cost-type” contracts where firms are hired for unknown costs, which the firm declares after operations have been under much debate.²⁸ Finally, attention has been devoted to how this industry can be adequately governed and contracts supervised. Even the advocates of the industry recognize that privatization has taken place in a disorganised, haphazard fashion and without anything like a sufficient supervisory authority.²⁹ This has not only lowered the state gains from privatization. It has also created insecurity and unpredictable bureaucratic red-tape for the firms.

Some, including the military, have tried to bring security considerations into this debate by pointing out that private companies may not be very efficient when it comes to the quality of the final product: security provision.³⁰ In a situation where “non-military members are maintaining fielded weapon systems, supporting field operations and managing and operating information and intelligence systems”, that is they are as important as soldiers for many operations, the performance of contractors is crucial. However, in most countries³¹ unlike soldiers, contractors cannot be counted on to follow military discipline nor can they be held accountable to military courts. They cannot be ordered to do things falling outside their contracts. Even under contract, contractors cannot be forced to perform if it would force them to go into “harm’s way.” Moreover, contractors may argue that they do not want to take on specific tasks, refuse to prolong their contracts or simply use their individual right to terminate employment rather than endure hardship. Finally, contractors may not fulfill their contracts in the way that military commanders thought they would. They might do a bad job, cheat on contract obligations or do things in ways the military dislikes. Examples of contractors behaving in this way abound.³² As Paula Rebar, who is a senior Pentagon analyst focusing on management issues points out, the reliance on private contractors “can put us at risk and it places added burdens on the commander in the field. Not only does he have to worry about his soldiers, he has to provide protection for the contractors.”³³

These arguments, which situate PMCs as security actors, and not only as means to greater efficiency and lesser spending have had some impact on the debate. It is now more important than ever for PMCs seeking a better image to show that they are reliable, efficient and cheap in their provision of services. However, to a large extent the debate continues to revolve around economic considerations. This line of inquiry is neither superfluous nor uninteresting. On the contrary, it is crucial for financial planners and tax payers to know if the much touted privatization gains are really there and, if they are not, whether they can be had by improving supervisory practices and ensuring competition. But, this liberal economic literature really puts politics in parenthesis. It matters only to the extent that it influences the efficiency firms and the operations of markets. How the operations of markets and firms matter for politics, and even for security, is a secondary question. Therefore this discussion has little to say about (because it is not interested in) the rise of PMCs as security actors. In this discussion PMCs are primarily economic actors, interesting above all for their economic virtues and vices.

²⁷ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d, 2002a).

²⁸ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d).

²⁹ See for example (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

³⁰ (Zamparelli 1999: 14-5).

³¹ The UK is an exception to this, at least according to (Krahmann 2003).

³² For the UK see e.g. “The first privatised war” *The Observer* 2 March 2003.

³³ “Pentagon’s private army”, *Fortune* 3 March 2003.

B. Questions of power and neglect of economics

Liberal policy-makers and (political) economists have strange allies in downplaying of the impact of PMCs as security actors: namely part of the IR (international relations as an academic discipline) establishment. IR scholars are not primarily interested in saving money and promoting efficiency. Their prime interest is in war and peace, in politics and power and they certainly do not neglect politics or security or politics in their writings. They take a very different road to underestimating the significance of PMCs: they tend to neglect economics. They do so in their analysis of wars generally and they do so in their understanding of PMCs by downplaying the role of independent economic motives. To the extent that they do recognize the impact of PMCs, it tends to be in the context of weak states where PMCs are intervening in combat something. The overall conclusion is that PMCs are not significant security actors in strong (Western) states.

This can be no place to make a general overview of literature on security which finds it difficult to incorporate market actors as security actors.³⁴ However, it is important to illustrate the general point that for much IR and security writing – even on weak states where the impact of economic motives and actors has been the most extensively discussed – it is possible to trivialize the impact of markets and economic considerations. Holsti's recent work on the changing nature of war and the state is a good illustration. It presents the "weak state dilemma" (of being illegitimate and hence having to be repressive which further increases illegitimacy) as the key source of contemporary wars. Holsti does not see any significant role for the international economy or markets.³⁵ But then his discussion of political economy approaches (pp. 136-140) draws on work by Ted Moran and Johan Galtung from the early 1970s (sic).³⁶ Similarly, Alexander Wendt dismisses the import of non-state and economic actors simply by stating that "my premise is that since states are the dominant form of subjectivity in contemporary world politics this means that they should be the primary unit of analysis for thinking about the global regulation of violence."³⁷ In both books two decades of political economy writing (which may of course be mistaken) about things like resource wars, war lord politics, the importance of political economy to new wars or post-modern wars are simply not mentioned.³⁸

With respect to PMCs this overall neglect of economics translates first and foremost as an exclusion of PMCs from analysis. However, if and when the development of PMCs is mentioned, its importance (to Western states) is minimized by two kinds of arguments: 1) PMCs are not really private actors at all and 2) if they matter they only do so in the developing world. I will first show how these arguments are made and then discuss why they are problematic.

First, the rise of PMCs is a matter of delegation and not a privatization of military force. The rise of PMCs reflects the increasing importance of "foreign policy by proxy." They are the "covert wing" of Western government policies.³⁹ In the wording of one observer, PMCs "like stable not fragile state. In that respect, their interests and those of the state are usually the same. They have never sought to challenge states."⁴⁰ This view is plausible for a number of reasons. Many firms have very close links to the state. In some cases they are formally linked to the state through partial ownership as firms have been partially but not entirely privatized (much of

³⁴ For more general discussions see (Kirschner 1998; Kapstein 2002/3) and relating to the English school specifically see (Gonzalez-Pelaez and Barry 2003 forthcoming).

³⁵ The one exception to this is in the discussion of the role of clandestine market in small arms (p. 131-2).

³⁶ (Holsti 1996: 137).

³⁷ (Wendt 1999: 9). He goes on to insist that even if non-state actors may be important in prompting change, change still happens through the state.

³⁸ For example (Duffield 1994, 1998; Reno 1998; Kaldor 1999: chap. 6; Berdal and Malone 2000; Cilliers 2000).

³⁹ For a discussion and rejection of these positions see (O'Brien 2000a).

⁴⁰ (Coker 1998: 111).

French PMCs would fit this category⁴¹). Moreover, personal links are strong. Policy-makers are often included on boards, as the close links between Dick Cheney and Halliburton (the republican ex. secretary of defence and later vice president Cheney has been the company's CEO and president) which has recently been a subject of much public debate in the US illustrates.⁴² Links to the military are omnipresent as almost everyone is an ex. soldier. In some firms there is a clear dominance by some part of an armed force. EO (and the firms which have continued existing after it) was a product of the South African Defence Forces, Sandline was closely linked to the UK Special Forces, MPRI hire from the US armed forces etc. Other firms (Armorgroup) are truly multinational and some will also employ members of non-state armed groups (EO e.g. employed former ANC members).⁴³ Most firms engaged in consultancy, training or provision make a point out of this close relationship for the rather obvious reason that the successful military career of their staff is an important indication that the firm can provide good quality services. Finally, many firms make it a principle not to take contracts that do not have the approval of their home state and, inversely, that states push contracts with specific firms onto their allies.⁴⁴ There can be little doubt that PMCs are often closely linked to both military and political establishments. The conclusion often explicitly drawn (and confirmed by many PMC representatives) is that PMCs are acting in accordance with their "home state."⁴⁵

The second way of trivializing the role of PMCs as security actors is to focus exclusively on the most spectacular aspect of security privatization: renewed "mercenary" activity, that is the engagement of foreigners attracted by the prospect of financial gain in armed conflicts which are located in weak or failed states in the developing world.⁴⁶ Indeed, discussions about PMCs have focused mainly on the role of companies such as EO and Sandline in military operations in Sierra Leone, Angola, Papa New Guinea, Bosnia, Eritrea/Ethiopia or Columbia.⁴⁷ This focus is logical because the engagement of the PMCs directly breaks (or seems to break⁴⁸) with thinking on the role of states, past international practice and international law. Mercenarism has been considered illegitimate since the middle of the 19th Century.⁴⁹ This has been enshrined in international law, including in the OUA and UN conventions.⁵⁰ This makes for a clear and heated debate about the provision of direct combat services: should we or should we not encourage/ allow PMCs to take on direct and independent roles in international conflicts and what are the implications? This is an important discussion which there is no reason to shy away from.⁵¹ However, it also tends to confine the discussion about the role of PMCs as security actors to relative few cases located in weak states. It turns the problem of PMCs into a question of power and politics, and more specifically the a question about the lack of power and political control by weak states on their territory. A renditions specialists on power and politics find easier to deal with.

Both roads to underestimating the role of PMCs are mistaken and explicable by a neglect of

⁴¹ "French blueprint reveals new-look industry links" *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 22 April 1998.

⁴² For example (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d); "Details given on contract Halliburton was awarded" *New York Times*, 11 April 2003.

⁴³ (Singer 2003: 116).

⁴⁴ MPRI is a case in point. It does not take contracts which do not have government approval and its contracts are often promoted by US diplomacy (as e.g. in Croatia or Columbia) (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 9).

⁴⁵ For discussion see (Singer 2003: 229).

⁴⁶ This paraphrases the standard definition of "mercenary" given in article 49 of the Geneva Convention.

⁴⁷ There are many accounts of these cases but see for example (Reno 1998; Zarate 1998; Arnold 1999; O'Brien 2000b; Mandel 2001).

⁴⁸ Some argue that it does nothing of the sort and that PMCs are in fact not mercenaries as understood in international law and political practice when they intervene (Zarate 1998).

⁴⁹ (Thomson 1994; Avant 2000).

⁵⁰ (OAU 1972; UN 1989).

⁵¹ (Brooks 2000b; Isenberg 2000; Leander 2003 forthcoming).

economics. First, looking at PMCs as prolongations of government policy requires an effort to deliberately exclude the private, corporate story of the business. PMCs are a heterogenous lot. Many firms do not have the kind of close ties just described. But even for firms that do, an excessive emphasis on the links to politics and to the military risks making too little of the corporate and private aspect of the business. The industry, its advocates and scholars studying it have insisted heavily on the label “private military company.” Part of the reason is to avoid the label “mercenaries.” But it is also because the firms are operating as companies on the basis of profit motives. They are “more than mercenaries.”⁵² Allowing for variation, firms have professional management structures and PR departments. They are quoted on stock markets. They use tax heavens when it suits their operations. They are linked to other firms. They form strategic partnerships. They merge, consolidate and are bought up by other firms and financial groups. Managers in the sector think of themselves as competing for market shares in a global market. They look for government protection in doing this (just as any national champion would). It is superficial and mistaken to dismiss all of this as pure masquerade and treat firms as extensions of governments. Even if it is true that firms usually prefer stable governments it is also true that very often short terms strategies ensuring gain will prime over long terms strategies for preserving stability.⁵³ We are witnessing a “market for force” in the making and it is far from clear that governments (including strong ones) control it.

Second, even if the focus on “mercenaries” in weak states is important, the neglect of other aspects of PMC activity reflects a highly restrictive understanding of what PMCs are which more interest in the economics of the business would make impossible. Most PMCs are not (or do not call themselves) military providers but as *consultants* or *logistics* firms.⁵⁴ They also have most of the contracts. “Non-essential” functions typically make up more than half of the defence budget.⁵⁵ Not all of this goes to private firms and it is hard to find exact figures on how much does. Most countries provide no figures and they often do not know or do not want to tell.⁵⁶ However, it is a lucrative business. “It is the guys in the kitchens who are making the real money.”⁵⁷

Cooks may not be the most relevant security actors, for but many logistics and consultancy PMCs the case is less clear cut. The lines between the categories are blurred. Firms providing consultancy/training and logistics often end up with a direct role in combat situations. Perhaps the best known illustration of this is MPRI’s role in “Operation Storm” which turned the Bosnian war, but there are many others.⁵⁸ Similarly, logistics operations (in particular maintenance and intelligence) are so directly tied to military operations that it is hard to keep a clear distinction between civilians and soldiers. During Desert Storm, civilian contractors provide surveillance data during operational missions, maintenance of the TOW missile, the M1A1, the Bradley and the Patriot. Hence, contractor personnel went to the front lines to support their weapon systems and perform the same functions as soldiers, at times even replacing soldiers.⁵⁹ One consequence is that the worry that civilian contractors might be treated as mercenaries is

⁵² (Singer 2003: 66).

⁵³ For an elaboration of this point applied to MNCs in general see (Evans 1997).

⁵⁴ These classifications of the industry are taken from (Singer 2001/2) and (Spearin 2001).

⁵⁵ In the US for example it makes up around 70% of spending by the Department of Defence. “Moving with the times”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 15 Nov. 2000.

⁵⁶ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 8); “Outsourcing the dirty work”, *The American Prospect* May 1 2003.

⁵⁷ “Military Industrial Complexities”, *The Economist*, June 11 2003.

⁵⁸ The exact extent of the involvement is open to discussion. But it is very reasonable to assume that the firm was definitely involved in planning the operations and possibly even in carrying it out. [Singer, 2003 #2693: 186-193].

⁵⁹ (Zamparelli 1999).

growing in the armed forces.⁶⁰ Another is that it clearly is not enough to focus on the impact provider firms (EO, Sandline, Trident and the like) have in weak states when assessing the impact of the industry as security actors.

It is to, sum up, the failure to go beyond conventional divisions of labour between economics and politics which explains that the role of PMCs as security actors can be neglected in spite of their growing importance. Liberal policy-makers and political economists can simply ignore it by focussing on savings and efficiency. Inversely IR scholars minimize it by leaving out the economics of the business. This makes it possible either to reduce PMCs to a prolongation of state policies and/or to interpret them as significant only in relatively few cases in very weak states. As this section has shown though, the division of labour is untenable and tends to break down. Security concerns and politics come into the liberal discussion via the back door through the concern with the “product” PMCs are supposed to assist in producing, security. Economics comes into the discussion about power as the PMCs do follow economic goals and are a much wider and diversified group than a narrow focus on military providers allows for. There is a logical pressure on those who do analyse the industry both to recognize that PMCs are security actors and to analyse it within a political economy framework broadly defined.

2. Analyzing the Significance of PMCs as Security Actors

Even if PMCs are recognised as security actors it is important to ask how significant they are and to analyse that significance. Mere presence does not make significance. As many have argued, and Krasner most prominently, work on sovereignty and state authority often conflates authority and control. Moreover, it departs from idealized understandings of both underestimating the degree to which sovereignty has always been an exercise in “organized hypocrisy”, and overestimating the significance of the rise of new actors or international linkages.⁶¹ To say that PMCs are significant as security actors, it is not enough to show that they are present, strong economic, politicized actors. It is necessary to show that they have an impact on authority relations. There is a considerable political economy literature on PMCs trying to show and conceptualise precisely this. Therefore this section will discuss that literature. However, it will insist that it has left out one crucial kind of question about how PMCs influence state authority: with few and partial exceptions, it has not elaborated the role of PMCs in shaping security concerns. The last section of the paper illustrates why and how PMCs matter for the construction of security, why this is important for authority relations and it suggests that to capture this requires a sociological approach to political economy.

A. A missing aspect in the discussion about PMCs as security actors

A decade of political economy analysis of PMCs has not failed to produce interesting results in terms of the significance of the firms as security actors. The discussion about PMCs has moved beyond the initial stage where a key issue was to establish and explain the existence of the firms and document their activities.⁶² Although these concerns have not disappeared, present discussions are centred on the implications of PMCs and on how to deal with/react to their rise. This section points to some of the key issues that have emerged in this debate. Partly it does so to have an excuse to restate some of the key points that have been made. But more centrally, aim of

⁶⁰ (Michaels 1999).

⁶¹ (Krasner 1999).

⁶² For such discussions see e.g. (Isenberg 1997; Shearer 1998; Sheppard 1998; Adams 1999).

this discussion is to show that enquiries into the role of PMCs in constructing public security concerns have not been given enough attention.

Singer's recent book is useful for pinning down the key issues in the debate about the implications of the rise of PMCs as security actors.⁶³ The discussion of "the implications" starts by a chapter entitled contractual dilemmas. It covers questions about what the rise of PMCs entails for *military operations* in a relatively narrow sense. It focuses in particular on the difficulty of controlling military operations through contracts and hence on one form of loss of state authority entailed by the increasing presence of PMCs as security actors. The second chapter covers the way PMCs influence *international relations* (as a political practice) by reshaping the conditions by which balance of power and alliances are made as well as by altering the possibilities of key actors. The key tenor of the argument is that power has become increasingly "fungible" since military might can be bought (p. 258) and that international relations is less predictable as states become less dependent on alliances and new actors are empowered (and there are emerging forms of renewed corporate imperialism, p. 377). The consequence is "alternative power and authority linked to markets rather than to the territorial state" (p. 256), that is again a significant effect on state authority. The third chapter focuses on the impact of firms on *civil – military relations*. Here the discussion is far less conclusive. In weak states the effect is unclear as PMCs can either upset or stabilise relations. In stable state Singer argues that they might "seriously impact the domestic distribution of status, roles, and resources" (p. 308). Very unfortunately this is the penultimate sentence of the chapter. The next chapter deals with how *public ends* are affected by the rise of PMCs. It deals with how PMCs have circumvented policy-restrictions, lobbied policy-makers and pursued their own foreign policy agenda. It also makes the point that privatisation is a way of shifting the debate about security away from public debate (congress, parliament) and instead making it a matter of contractual negotiation. Again the conclusion is fairly clear, authority over public security is undergoing change. Finally there is a last chapter on "*morality*" (the only one not directly tied to state authority) which argues that PMCs cannot be counted on to be more (but neither are they necessarily less) moral than public armed forces.

Singer's arguments are neither the only ones around nor are they uncontested, but they are indicative of the focal points of the debate about PMCs and of the key arguments establishing PMCs as significant security actors. It is also indicative of the absence of interest in how public security concerns are constituted, that is a lack of interest in how security concerns can be not only influenced, but actually shaped and defined by PMCs. Singer touches this issue in passing at several places in his study, but fails to elaborate. His idea about evolving status and roles referred to could easily be developed into an argument about who has the weight to define security concerns. But Singer does not take this step. In fact, it is a concern with the declining status and possible corruption of the military which leads him to make the statement at all (306-7). The same is true in other places. In his discussion of the impact of PMCs on international relations Singer writes that "the *locus of judgement* on how the military operations are carried out in the field is now outside state control" (256, my emphasis). But he does not discuss what this entails for how states define their own security, how they react to the altered locus of judgement by adjusting their own judgements (the looping effect). He has well informed discussions about lobbying and links between policy-makers and the industry. Among other things he takes up the links between Cheney and Halliburton/Brown&Roots and the (p. 204-7)). But he does not go into the implications of this for the definition of security concerns and needs. He points to the money lost, the lack of competition and the potential for corruption. The list of examples could be prolonged but this is enough to underscore that although Singer's overall conclusion is that

⁶³ Singer's book is both the most recent statement on the topic and one of the most elaborate.

the rise of PMCs has entailed “a profound development in the manner that security is both conceptualized and realized”, he does not elaborate on the extent to which security conceptualisations have in fact changed or how.⁶⁴

This neglect is in no way unique to Singer. Rather it is typical of the focus and tenure of the discussion more generally. There are other authors who, like Singer, come close to drawing attention to the role of PMCs in shaping security concerns. Deborah Avant is one.⁶⁵ She argues that it is not sufficient to think simply about how PMCs influence military operations (functional dimension in her wording) and the attainment of goals (political dimension), it also necessary to include what she calls the dimension of “social norms and values.” However, since the focus of her analysis of accountability she is mainly interested in the ways in which PMCs do or don’t violate existing norms, not in how they (re)shape them. In her words “if the agent violated the social norms and laws, we might argue that it was not behaving responsibly.”⁶⁶ But how these social norms and laws themselves (and the political and functional goals as well for that matter) are altered and reconstituted by the rise of PMCs is something Avant does not make a direct object of analysis. Avant also discusses the importance of looking at the “logic of appropriateness” and she makes the point that taken for granted norms matter the most (11-15). But the way she uses this discussion to ask questions about how changing “the logic of appropriateness”⁶⁷ might make it possible “to capitalize on the usefulness of the companies by giving them a legitimate role” (12) or how it might “encourage military companies to act within the framework of liberal values by encouraging them to see themselves as military professionals” (14). The question of how the rise of the PMCs affect the criteria by which usefulness and/or how liberal international values are defined and judged (presumably by the state or the public) is left as open as the question of how PMCs influence the way that security is defined and understood.

It is not entirely clear why the issue of how PMCs influence the conceptualisation of public security is excluded from the discussions. It is an important consideration for state authority and for thinking about the significance of PMCs as security actors. Moreover, as just shown both Avant and Singer could easily develop an analysis of the question following the thread of their own arguments. Therefore, the exclusion can be explained neither by an *a priori* lack of interest in the question nor by some kind of theoretical incompatibility. I would suspect that explanation lies in a combined lack of interest in how security is constructed⁶⁸ and a fear of appearing conspiratorial and old fashioned. Anyone who starts discussing how the private military industry influences public policies and concerns (in particular if they focus on lobbying, as would be most logical at least for Singer) runs the risk of sounding disturbingly like the 1970s critics of the “military-industrial-complex” and that is a certain recipe for discredit. But be this as it may. Exactly why the question of how PMCs shape public policy concerns is not asked in these studies, and is more generally left out of the debate surrounding PMCs, is not a central issue here. The reasons for the exclusion matter less than clarifying that the exclusion matters and open the debate about how significant PMCs are in defining security. This is next section’s task.

⁶⁴ (Singer 2003: 8).

⁶⁵ Rather expected in view of her earlier work establishing the significance of changing world views linked to the enlightenment for the transition to citizen armies (Avant 2000).

⁶⁶ (Avant forthcoming: 2-3). Avant’s book is forthcoming, I have to check with her about this to make sure that the argument remains fair.

⁶⁷ This in itself reflects a rather narrow understanding of what a logic of appropriateness is.

⁶⁸ This in turn reflects a neglect of the “constructivist” security literature where the constitution of security is the central focus (the “Copenhagen School” in particular). For introductions overviews and dissents regarding this literature see: (Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998; Huysmans 1998; McSweeney 1999: chap. 4 in particular).

B. PMCs and the definition of public security concerns

Security concerns are not givens we all agree upon when we see them. The importance of defining something as a security concern is well illustrated by the debate preceding the latest Iraq war which turned around whether or not Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (and marginally the rule of Saddam Hussein and his links to international terrorist networks) were a threat to the rest of the world (or the region) warranting an intervention. Just as in this case, there will be contending interpretations of whether something is a threat or not as well as of what kind of reaction is warranted. One way of explaining why and how some threats become security concerns and others not, is to look at how they are inscribed and made sense of in specific political discourses and how basic understandings (or discourses) produce specific security concerns.⁶⁹ Another is to ask the question why specific discourses and understandings become dominant.⁷⁰ The discussion below relates to the latter kind of question. It suggests the importance of asking what the rise of PMCs entails for which security discourses become dominant. It will suggest three directions in which this question can be pursued.

(i) Providing Intelligence as a way of defining security concerns

A first way of asking the question is to look at what is entailed by making PMCs central for intelligence. It is often pointed out that PMCs are increasingly central when it comes to providing intelligence, including during military operations. How central is hard to ascertain. Former CIA director James Woolsey, estimates that about 95% of all intelligence comes from open source and much of this is from private firms. AirScan was the "spy in the sky" for the US in Bosnia (unfortunately using publically accessible television meaning the information was available to anyone with a home satellite television⁷¹). The US air force outsourced part of its high resolution photography to Space Imaging and Digital Globe in Afghanistan. "The private intelligence sub-sector is at the initial stage of a huge boom. For many nations and political groups, most of their intelligence analysis and operations are gradually being outsourced to private firms."⁷² This is visible not least in the current trend of mergers and takeovers involving firms specializing in information technology and private military firms. By way of example MPRI has been bought up by L-3 Communications and DynCorp bought up by Computer Sciences Unit.

This privatization of intelligence can be thought to have very direct implications for who it is that defines threats. As a consequence of privatization, a growing share of the information on the basis of which it is decided whether or not something is a security concern is provided by private firms. The information is structured and selected by the firm that provides it. It would be interesting to look in greater detail on who defines exactly what information should be provided and by what categories. As has been persuasively argued by others the routine boxing of information into categories is in itself a way of creating threats and security concerns that might not previously have existed.⁷³ For example grouping and collecting intelligence on the illegal activities of immigrants, Muslim networks, or terrorist organisation makes it possible to provide the information necessary to constitute these groups as security concerns. The practical knowledge most political actors have of the importance of these practices is well illustrated by the resistance against being lumped into a specific group and being integrated into the intelligence

⁶⁹ (Malmvig 2002; Hansen 2004 forthcoming).

⁷⁰ This is the road suggested by (McSweeney 1999; Bigo 2002).

⁷¹ (Singer 2003: 241).

⁷² (Singer 2003: 148).

⁷³ (Bigo 2000).

system.⁷⁴ A reasonable guess is that the private firms providing intelligence also play an important role in defining what intelligence should be provided in what categories. However, it is an interesting and relevant empirical task to look more closely this.

But even if the categories are defined in collaboration with the military, foreign office or security officials, the firms most certainly do an important part of selecting out which information is relevant and which is not. In many cases the firms are also hired to analyse the intelligence provided or in other words to tell public officials what it should think about the information the firm provides. That this matters for who speaks about security and who defines it is an obvious and classical insight. If private firms gather and analyse the information which form the basis for decisions about what is (and what is not) a security threat, they set the agenda for any decision. Even if public actors may have the ultimate authority for deciding what is a threat and how it should be treated, that formal authority is of limited relevance if it is exercised in relation to an agenda controlled by private firms.

The extreme case illustrating this is when, in military operations, a private firm is the sole provider of the information on the basis of which a commander makes decisions. One example is of such a situation is the case where two American employees working for AirScan and flying a surveillance plane directed the Columbian air force to drop a cluster bomb. The bomb was dropped on a village and killed 18 civilians. The Columbian Air Force claims (the employees dispute this) that they were directed by the employees of the private military company.⁷⁵ Another example is when, in March 2001, a CIA surveillance plane, flown by private employees of Aviation Development Corporation, mistakenly identified a plane as carrying drug traffickers and a Peruvian military plane therefore shut it down, killing an American missionary and her infant.⁷⁶

Both examples are well known because things went wrong and they have been followed by mediatized court cases. But the issue of concern here is not that PMCs make mistakes, it is to underline that even if it is a public actor (a soldier) who has the ultimate authority to decide on when to use what kind of force (to push the button to drop the bomb or pull the trigger to shoot down the plane), it may not matter much when private actors control the information. In most situations, the significance of information is less immediate. When it comes to deciding if a government or a movement is a threat for example, there will be competing sources of information, more time to double check and a possibility for the government/movement to present its version of the story. There will in other words be considerable scope for judgement and interpretation on behalf of public authorities. It is therefore at least as important to insist on how the rise of PMCs influences that judgement (as the paper now will) as it is to underline the importance of PMCs in providing information.

(ii) Training and consultancy shaping security understandings

A second way of pursuing the question of how PMCs might influence the understanding of security is to look at how and if they shape how information is interpreted and judged.

They can shape how information is interpreted in very direct ways, by lobbying decision makers at different levels trying to get them to adopt an interpretation of facts which corresponds to that of the interests of the firms. This may involve a rereading of who is an ally and who is a threat. For example after intense lobbying the MPRI managed to convince the US government that the “National Security Enhancement Plan” for the formation of a costal defence in

⁷⁴ E.g. Thutail begins his account of the significance of categorizing and constructing territory and geo-political space with a story of how Irish peasants resisted integration into British cartography by assassinating the map-maker sent out to place them on the map (Ó Tuathail 1996: 1).

⁷⁵ “US pair’s role in bombing shown” *Los Angeles Times* 16 March 2003.

⁷⁶ “Outsourcing: PMCs”, *Special Report* May 2002 box 4.

Equatorial Guinea was a contract the MPRI could take on within the frame of US national interests although the US has a long standing policy of not supporting the country's military regime with close ties to Cuba and North Korean. The winning argument was that if the MPRI did not get the contract some other firm (a French one in this case) would.⁷⁷ But most of the time the questions are of the more mundane nature regarding which firms should get what kinds of contracts. Hence, DynCorp, which has been a major donator to the Republican party was one of very few firms invited to bid on a contract for rebuilding the police forces in Iraq.⁷⁸ Similarly, Frank Carlucci (secretary of defence under Regan) who was heading BDM when the firm bought Vinell and counting key republican personalities including James Baker and George W.H. Bush on its payroll managed to increase the number of public defence contracts of Vinell very considerably. Observers believe that he did so on the basis of the contacts of the firm.⁷⁹ The importance and impact of direct lobbying is much discussed and well understood. However, it is more often evoked because of the (economic) costs, the costs to democracy or its immorality than it is for its impact on the interpretation of security and security needs.

There is a less tangible, but no less interesting or significant, way in which PMCs shape the interpretations of security and this is through their non-negligible role in training and consulting policy-makers as well as the military directly. Much of the training that is done by PMCs is rather technical in nature. It involves things like simulation exercises, pilot training or instructions on how to use technologies⁸⁰ which might be seen as having little influence on overall understandings of security and security needs. But also this kind of training shapes the understanding of equipment needs and also to some extent of threats and threat situations.⁸¹ But PMCs also offer less technical training which is directly designed to shape the understanding professional soldiers and policy-makers have of the world. For example, MPRI (one of the bigger firms in consultancy and training⁸²) has taken over the Reserve Officer Training Corps selling training programmes in military science operating in more than 200 universities. It runs, provides staff for and designs training courses for the armed forces (including within the CGSC Military Leadership Instructor Program).⁸³ It also runs the African Centre for Strategic Studies (ACSS) organising training specialised on Africa.⁸⁴ Even if the bulk of MPRI employees actually doing the training and recruitment are former Army staff, "the irony still remains; the next generation army leaders will be introduced to the force through the services of private firms"⁸⁵ and trained by them one might be tempted to add.

Training is not only about "national" PMCs training home military. Hence a sub-question to pursue is which PMCs shape security understandings across the world. In this some firms weigh more than others. In commenting on MPRI's success in the field Singer writes that "the firm's notoriety and growth within the military consulting sector, is due to its successful expansion into global markets."⁸⁶ The number of international contracts is indeed long. Among the more significant it is possible to mention ACRI (African Crisis Response Program) aimed at creating a multinational force for emergency interventions where MPRI supplies administration and

⁷⁷ (Singer 2003: 196).

⁷⁸ "US Firms Secretely bid to uphold law in Iraq" *Los Angeles Times* 18 April 2003; and "Scandal-hit US firm wins key contracts" *The Guardian*, 13 April 2003.

⁷⁹ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 3).

⁸⁰ "Privatization proposed for UK flying training" *Jane's Defence Weekly* 19 July 2000; "Air force cuts act as spur to contract out", *Jane's Defence Weekly* 16 April 1997.

⁸¹ (Hutchful 2000; Olonisakin 2000).

⁸² http://www.mpri.com/channels/nat_overview.html .

⁸³ For further details and other examples see: http://www.mpri.com/subchannels/nat_business.html#institute .

⁸⁴ (Singer 2003: 195).

⁸⁵ (Singer 2003: 185).

⁸⁶ (Singer 2003: 186).

training⁸⁷ and the “Train and Equip” programme where the MPRI was hired to build up and train the armed forces of the Bosnian Federation in the wake of the Dayton agreement.⁸⁸ In both cases the contracts were contested for a number of reasons. One was the bias inherent in having training provided by a *US, private* firm. Such training would facilitate the coordination of interventions with US troops as well as promote a US tainted understanding of armed operations narrowly defined as well as of security more broadly.

Since there is an international market for these training services a second and related sub-question is what kinds of security understanding are promoted by private firms. So far only MPRI training programmes have been cited. MPRI makes a point out of only doing “ethical” that is US approved business. But the MPRI is a softy in the business. In the words of a *Soldiers of Fortune* journalist, “they’re a glorified transportation corps, as opposed to a military outfit. They’re almost like the FedEx of government service.”⁸⁹ There are far less “ethical” training programmes on the market for governments (and others!) who are interested in buying them. Governments often end up condemning “training programmes” of firms operating from their territory. Similarly in the wake of 9/11 a number of US and UK policy-makers discovered and closed down training centres they argued served terrorist networks. And during the recent conflict in the Ivory Coast, the UK condemned the operations of Northbridge in the country and South Africa, the role played by unnamed South Africans as technical advisers in the country.⁹⁰

The aim here is not to argue that PMCs now dictate how security is understood and intelligence interpreted either by directly lobbying decision makers or by shaping their opinions by training them. The aim is to draw attention to the importance of asking questions about the role of PMCs in shaping the way decision-makers, the military, and non-state movements across the world at different levels understand security (and hence judge and react to information that they get). This evokes practical questions about who should be allowed to give what kind of training to whom which clearly need far more thorough consideration. But it also evokes questions broader questions about what is happening to the authority of various states when it comes to defining security concerns.

(iii) PMCs as security experts and the evolving weight of security discourses

A last, and arguably the most the significant, way to pursue the question of how PMCs shape the definition of public security concerns is through their influence on the relative weight of different security discourses.

Many scholars working on the “PMC debate” raise a very immediate way in which privatisation has altered the weight of different voices: privatization moves the security debate out of the public realm, away from Congress in the US case and instead into a restricted realm where the executive, the military, the secret services and PMCs can decide how issues should be defined and handled. This point is usually made to underline the effect of PMCs “democracy” or on the balance between different public institutions. Indeed, privatisation itself is often explained

⁸⁷ (Singer 2003: 190); “Corporate Soldiers: The US government privatizes the use of force” *Multinational Monitor*, March 1999. The program seems to have transited into the *Africa Crisis Operations Training and Assistance Program (ACOTA)*: The ACOTA is a US State Department coordinated interagency program that works with African states and other allies to develop and enhance peace operations and humanitarian assistance capabilities among selected African armies. MPRI provides the battalion and brigade task force level command and staff training for the program, in coordination with US military forces
http://www.mpri.com/subchannels/int_africa.html .

⁸⁸ See MPRI’s home http://www.mpri.com/channels/int_overview.html .

⁸⁹ “Corporate Soldiers: The US government privatizes the use of force” *Multinational Monitor*, March 1999.

⁹⁰ “The UK has warned UK company against recruiting mercenaries to work in Ivory Coast” *BBC* 3 April 2003; “Where mercenaries roam” *New Democrat*, 15 Nov 2002.

by the fact that it makes it possible to hide from the public eye. Decision makers can dispense with justifying interventions as well as with explaining body-bags. Concretely, in the US contracts below Z50 mn. do not have to be notified, unlike troop deployment. Moreover, if they are placed under the “foreign military sales” program they can circumvent the need for licencing.⁹¹ Finally, even contracts that are discussed publically can often remain obscure. Contractors do not have a legal obligation to disclose the details fo contracts. Recent measures have been taken in the US to further decrease the need to disclose information “the burden is now on the government to prove that the firm would not be competitively harmed by releasing the figures.”⁹² This development is a shift in terms of which public institutions can be informed about and make their voices heard when it comes to actual decisions on security matters.

But beyond this very direct and institutional influence, it is important to ask how the rise of PMCs alters the standing and status of public and private voices in security (keeping in mind that the rise of PMCs themselves reflects this change). Private firms increasingly pose as the security specialists par excellence, with authority equal or superior to that of public security actors. PMCs are called upon as defence specialists establishing evaluation criteria (and writing the evaluations). Not untypically, the Northrop Grunman company, Logicon, providing simulation exercises to US troops in Europe set up their own quality control plan and the same was done by DynCorp guarding US army installations in Kuwait.⁹³ The logic seems to be that there simply is no more competent agency than the firm itself to set up the evaluation criteria. But more than this, PMCs are now so accepted as security experts that they are invited to establish also defence policies and criteria of evaluation for the armed forces more broadly – at least in the US. For example, the LOGCAP (Logistics Civil Augmentation Program) to plan the logistical side of contingency operations is outsourced to private firms (Brown&Root, then DynCorp and then Brown&Root again).⁹⁴ Similarly, the development of doctrine is partly outsourced. These are examples drawn from MPRI’s activities: Through the “Joint Warfighting Assessment Center” MPRI provides senior analysts for strategic, operational, and tactical level assessments using various combat analysis tools in support of the Joint Staff and unified commands. It also supports the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) “in developing Information Superiority concepts, doctrine and requirements for future warfighting capabilities” and by expertise for concept papers on Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) that exploit new communications technology and command and control organizational requirements.”⁹⁵

Even very sensitive military related affairs are placed in private hands. In the US, the Los Alamos National Laboratory (the nuclear weapons lab) has been privatised. The reason given is a “string of high-profile management breakdowns – from the Wen Ho Lee case to taxpayer-funded shopping sprees.”⁹⁶ The non-stated assumption is that the private sector would do a better job. Similarly, in the UK the “Defence Evaluation and Research Agency” (DERA) has been privatised to 75% and split into two separate agencies: QuinetiQ the for profit firm and Dstl (Defence Science and Technology Laboratory) which is an agency of the UK Ministry of Defence).⁹⁷ The reason for privatizing is that makes for better and cheaper research. The effect is that private firms set the frames for thinking in matters of security.

Looking at the potential change in status of private firms it would be important to tie them in

⁹¹ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 7).

⁹² “US curbs release of contract price data” *Defense Weekly*, 17 June 2002.

⁹³ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002d: 9).

⁹⁴ (Singer 2003: 207-214).

⁹⁵ For further details and examples: http://www.mpri.com/subchannels/nat_business.html#strategic .

⁹⁶ “Job Opening: Los Alamos Manager”, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/05/02/tech/main552068.shtml> .

⁹⁷ “DERA privatization plan comes under scrutiny”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly* 14 March 2001; http://www.dera.gov.uk/newsite/home_2.htm .

with the much wider social changes Susan Strange referred to as the advent of a “business civilization.”⁹⁸ These overall changes set the context within which PMCs have increased their status as security experts. The PMCs have themselves promoted this change. PMCs have been very effective in marketing their own activities as efficient and competent. An enquiry into how Tim Spicer managed to establish his firms (Sandline and its successors) and himself as significant and competent security actors, shows how Spicer concocted this image by hiring a public relations specialist (Sara Pearson of Spa Way); talking to the press, turning up at conferences and seminars, getting a ghost writer to write his 1999 book, *an unorthodox soldier*, and judiciously using business graduates from the University of Maryland.⁹⁹ This is an extreme case of PMC self-promotion based on relatively little. But it is far from a unique case of an attempt to improve the image of the own firm and the industry more generally. There are different styles for going about this. Of the more rugged kind is Andrew Williams commenting to the press on his Northbridge Services Group role in obtaining the release of some 100 foreign workers held hostage by striking workers on an Nigerian oil rig: “We brought in a representative of the hostage takers and showed him the guys and their equipment waiting to go. He got the message.”¹⁰⁰ But there are many other kinds. The point is that PMCs have done their utmost to inform the world (including policy-makers, armed forces, the media and the wider public) about their own competencies and capacities.

More than self promotion the industry has done much to underline incompetence, mismanagement and immorality in public forces as a way of asserting the own superiority. The discussion about the potential of PMCs for peacekeeping missions is illuminating in many ways. Advocates of the industry contrast PMC operations with the negative sides of peace-keeping as it exists: the slowness and uncertainty of deployment of UN forces, their inefficiency in operations, the pecuniary motives of many of the soldiers, their involvement in scandals of various kinds (their immoral behavior), the breaking of contracts and so on.¹⁰¹ But the strategy is more general. PMCs are saviours, sorting out the mess left by incompetent public armed forces.¹⁰² The following rendering is typical “Before MPRI entered the picture... Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International linked ACRI (African Crisis Response Initiative) trained battalions to murders, rapes and beatings.... MPRI is at the top of the military training field. ‘Committed to ethical business practices’ is written prominently on the firm’s promotional pamphlet.”¹⁰³

At stake here is not the accuracy of these statements, but rather their implications for the evolving understanding of the competence and value of public and private and private actors as security experts. With contextual variation, there are indications of a considerable evolution in how private and public security actors are valued. Twenty years ago, the position that private military contractors were as (if not more) competent than public soldiers was a minority position, even within the US where private control over the use of force has far deeper roots and more legitimacy than it does in Europe.¹⁰⁴ Today it is far from clear that it is, even outside the US. These developments deserve to be explored. If private voices do weigh more heavily in the security debate at all levels from the narrow military to the general public, this is a very profound challenge to state authority in the sphere of security. Hence, Singer is justified to mention the “changing status” of the military, but for reasons which are more far reaching than the future of their pension scheme.

⁹⁸ (Strange 1990: 260-271; also Gill 1995).

⁹⁹ (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists 2002c).

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in “Privatised military the way for the future”, *Reuters*, 9 May 2003.

¹⁰¹ See for example (Shearer 1998; Brooks 2000b; Isenberg 2000; Brayton 2002).

¹⁰² (Brooks 2000a).

¹⁰³ “Corporate Soldiers: The US government privatizes the use of force” *Multinational Monitor*, March 1999.

¹⁰⁴ (Deudney 1995).

In a statement characteristic of current discussions, Shearer writes that “most would argue that the power to authorise and delegate the use of military force should remain with states, preferably at the level of the UN Security Council. But once agreed, exactly what or who is deployed is less important – the issue then is to find the most effective and least costly alternative.”¹⁰⁵ This section has argued that this is not necessarily so. It has tried to show that what and who is deployed matters a great deal. It matters for the authority of states and/or the UN Security Council. The section began by pointing to a range of arguments drawn from the literature for why this is so. It pointed to arguments saying that who is deployed matters for the control over military operations, for the way that authority is exercised in the international system, and for who in the state has authority. But in addition to this, the section has showed that who is deployed matters for how security is defined. It matters because concretely the involvement of PMCs means that private firms provide information, shape the judgements public actors make on the basis of information they are given and more broadly alters the relative status of public and private actors and hence their weight in the debate. An old pun (which Bourdieu uses as the epitaph for his book on economics¹⁰⁶) says that “economics is about people making choices. Sociology is about why they don’t have any choices to make.” The bottom line of this paper is that a sociological approach to political economy is necessary to grasp the full significance of PMCs as security actors.

Conclusion

PMCs are present in security, but are they significant security actors? This paper has discussed different ways of answering this question. The first point the paper made was that it is possible argue that PMCs are not important, or to strongly down play their significance, either by evading the issue or by neglecting either the politics or the economics involved. The second point the paper made was that even those who take both the politics and economics of PMCs seriously have failed to explore how PMC are significant namely their role in defining and shaping public security concerns (as opposed to “just” influencing given concerns). It suggested that it is important to explore how PMCs shape security concerns by providing information, by influencing how public actors react to it, and by altering whose security concerns are headed to. Only if this dimension is adequately discussed can we draw conclusions about whether and how PMCs alter state authority. This paper has shown that many indicators point in the direction of rather substantial changes. Hence, the hunch of the paper is the opposite of that of Thomson. In the conclusion of her book she writes that “a shift away from sovereignty to heteronomy or something else would require a fundamental change in the identity of the national state. This would entail an end to or at least significant erosion of the state’s monopoly on the authority to deploy violence beyond its borders. It is not at all clear to me that this occurring.”¹⁰⁷ This paper has shown that there are rather firm indicators that fundamental changes are taking place in the meaning of state authority. However, the paper has also made clear that the changes are more studied (and better understood) in the context of some Western states (the US/UK) than in others. Moreover, even where the changes are subject to heated debate there far more empirical work is needed to ground general conclusions and especially empirical work that looks at who has the authority to define security through the lenses of a sociologically informed political economy perspective.

¹⁰⁵ (Shearer 2001: 30).

¹⁰⁶ (Bourdieu 2000).

¹⁰⁷ [Thomson, 1994 #2339: 153].

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