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Private security as moral drama: A tale of two scandals

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of scandals as they unfold in the private security industry. We begin by outlining our theoretical understanding of scandals, before tracking the key phases of two recent events - one in Sweden, the other in Britain. Scandals, we suggest, are best viewed as moral tales which dramatize a host of societal norms and values about private security and criminal justice, prompting a great deal of normative conflict. The wider point we draw from the analysis is that when market actors enter the field of policing and criminal justice, they not only re-shape that field, they are also re-shaped by it. Private security cannot, in other words, escape the moral dilemmas and conflicts that inescapably attend practices of policing and punishment.

Key words: legitimacy, moral economy, private security, scandal

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Introduction

Our purpose in this article is to explore the phenomenon of scandals as they unfold in the private security industry. Scandals have been the focus of scholars from a range of disciplines, including sociology (see e.g. Thompson 1995; Thompson 2000; Adut 2005; Adut 2008; Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008), media and communication studies (see e.g. Lull and Hinerman 1997; Allen and Savigny 2012) and political science (see e.g. Bowler and Karp 2004; Nyhan 2014). Yet, as Greer and McLaughlin (2013) have pointed out, there is a surprising absence of criminological research in this area. A discrete body of work has explored private security scandals, focusing principally on public images of the industry in the media (Livingstone and Hart 2002; White 2015). Others have couched private security scandals as studies in misconduct, approaching the topic largely from a regulatory perspective (Prenzler and Sarré 2008a; Prenzler and Sarré 2008b; Prenzler and Milroy 2012; White 2010; White 2016).

This article seeks to build upon these works by examining the origin and life course of scandals which take place in the private security industry. In so doing, we examine two major private security scandals which have come to light in Sweden and Britain, underlining in particular the work that private security elites – key players in the industry environment and company executives - do in order to repair legitimacy and deflect negative attention. The security companies we explore were, at the time of the eruption of the scandals, contracted by public institutions for the private provision of public services. Private security scandals, we suggest, are best viewed as moral tales which dramatize a host of societal norms and values about private security and criminal justice, triggering a great deal of normative conflict. The scandals explored here speak to ongoing debates about the privatization of criminal justice (Matthew 1989; Deering and Fielzer 2014), but they also highlight the increasing involvement of private security in the use of force (Avant 2004). It is important for our analysis that for an act of transgression to evolve into a scandal, the transgression must be ‘publicized to a “norm audience”, which is in fact offended’ (Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008: 209). A norm audience is a specific public identifying with the violated norm and reacting negatively to this violation. Publicly voiced disapproval – that is, a critical public discourse – in turn requires moral justification on the part of those accused of moral and/or legal wrongdoing (Adut 2008; Benoit 2015; Deegan 2006; Suchman 1995). Yet, such moral justifications and other image repair strategies are only voiced or adopted if those accused of wrongdoing perceive that salient audiences disapproves of their action (Benoit 2015).

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining our theoretical understanding of scandals in the private security industry as moral tales. After accounting for our methodological approach, we then discuss the key phases and the life cycle of the Swedish and the British scandals, including the carefully crafted responses from the industry and audiences. In so doing, we find that legitimacy and reputation are both valuable and fragile resources. Our exploration also highlights the contested nature of private security when it is aligned with public policing and criminal punishment. But the wider point we draw from our analysis is that when market actors enter the field of policing and criminal justice they not only re-shape that field (as both proponents and opponents of privatisation suggest), they are also re-shaped *by* it. Private security cannot escape the moral dilemmas and conflicts that inescapably attend practices of policing and punishment. For the purposes of this article, our understanding of policing is the exercise of a particular form of social control encompassing purposeful activities to maintain security within a given social order (Ericson 1982; Reiner 2010). Moreover, we would emphasise that the distinction made in the literature between private policing and public policing - where the former stands for the policing activities of private security companies and the latter for the activities of the public police authority - has been criticized as an overly simplified dichotomy not particularly useful for analytical purposes (Bayley & Shearing, 2001; Crawford & Lister, 2006). We adopt this criticism in our effort to focus more on general commonalities between different modes of policing and private security activity regardless of the type of organization, power, and authority and the kind of regulatory framework involved.

Private security scandals as moral tales

Theoretically, we draw on Thompson's (2000) analysis of scandal as actions and events involving transgressions of societal values, norms and moral codes. These are transgressions which become known to others and are 'sufficiently serious to elicit public response' (ibid: 13). It is important to note that the eruption of scandals require that the values and norms which are transgressed 'have some degree of moral force' in society (Thompson 2000: 15) since the public response constitutes a 'moralizing discourse which reproaches and rebukes, which scolds and condemns' (ibid: 20), having the capacity to seriously damage or destroy the reputation and legitimacy of those responsible.

In the wake of scandals, industry elites and security companies are faced with an enormous surge in moral taint since the reprehensible behaviour or event (re)produces a stigmatising image of the private security industry employing methods that defy the norms of civility (Hansen Lofstrand *et al* 2015). As will become evident, scandals also lay bare audiences

normative conceptions of criminal justice, from which private security is thought to have departed. Scandals matter, in this regard, because they are entangled with the inescapably moral dimensions of the market for security, that is, the very fact that the *economic* behaviour of buyers and sellers is shaped by a range of non-market values and commitments which they hold (Loader *et al.* 2014, 2015). Moral upset in the form of public responses to disclosures of the discrediting actions of private security companies indicate a disruption of a moral order, a clash between norm systems.

Theories of legitimacy are often tailored towards understanding the social relationships between individuals and institutions. While the concept is generally bound up with the right to be recognised and having remit over a specific area of life (Smith 2007), others stress that legitimacy must contain a normative element (Beetham 1991). For the private security industry to be viewed as legitimate, elites need audiences to judge the behaviour of the industry as being in line with the shared (or assumed shared) beliefs of their various publics. This much is revealed by research on the forms of legitimation work routinely engaged in by private security elites (Thumala *et al.* 2011). Legitimacy is, therefore, conferred on individual companies and the broader industry when audiences perceive that the actions of private security companies are ‘desirable, proper, or appropriate’ (Suchman 1995: 574). Scandals create legitimacy gaps, defined as a ‘lack of congruence between how society believes an organisation should act and how it is perceived that the organisation has acted’ (Deegan 2006: 163). Publicly voiced disapproval in the form of retorts to transgressions thereby require moral justifications on the part of those accused of wrongdoing (Adut 2008; Benoit 2015; Deegan 2006; Greer and McLaughlin 2013; Suchman 1995).

As Prenzler and Sarré (2008a) point out, the private security industry is prone to malpractice. Moreover, just like other powerful actors in society, private security managers and elites increasingly need to adapt to a new kind of mediatized visibility (Thompson 1995; 2000). While globalised communications media provides security industry elites and managers with new opportunities to manage their visibility, it simultaneously becomes ‘the source of a new and distinctive kind of *fragility*’ (Thompson 1995: 141, italics in original). Policing is undergoing significant change, moving from a low-visibility occupation to a high-visibility one (Goldsmith 2010; Brown 2015). Police officers across Western democracies now operate in unprecedented techno-social contexts in which their (deviant) behaviour may be captured on film and disseminated via social media outlets. It follows that the more private security takes on public functions, the more it is dragged out of the shadows and into the glare of public

contestation, becoming embroiled in the moral dramas with which policing and criminal justice are inescapably entangled. Since elite control over visibility is impossible in the age of ubiquitous social media (Thompson 2000), scandals within the private security industry can be regarded as something of an occupational hazard.

Inspired by major works on scandal (Thompson 2000; Greer and McLaughlin 2013), we understand private security scandals as comprising three key phases. The first is the *eruption phase*. In what others have called the pre-scandal phase (Thompson 2000) or latency phase (Greer and McLaughlin 2013), the dubious actions are known about, or suspected, by others and may involve investigations by journalists (*ibid.*). Secondly, the *scandal proper* phase begins with the public disclosure of the event, which in turn triggers an adversarial process of claims and counter-claims. To progress to this phase, a news organization must commit to report the event (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). Scandals are, to a large extent, constituted by disclosures and comments in the media and, as a result, the media itself also functions as an actor responding to events and actions depicted as immoral (Thompson 1997). The phase of the scandal proper is characterised by allegations and efforts assembled to repair legitimacy. Greer and McLaughlin (2013) identify three techniques of reputation protection: denial of the event or action, denial of the knowledge of the event or action, and denial of responsibility for it. A challenge for private security elites is that they need to deal with different stakeholders (Button 2007), and so several defence tactics may be required. Whether or not a scandal will seriously damage the reputation of a company depends on struggles over the symbolic power of the actors involved, through which some actors may influence the outcome of a scandal and, perhaps, public perceptions of the organization (Thompson 2000). In the scandal proper phase, the event may also become amplified, particularly when the transgressions of individuals are connected with broader allegations of systemic or institutional failure (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). Finally, the *phase of closure* may see the accused making a public confession (*ibid.*). This often leads to a range of status degradation ceremonies, from public shaming and humiliation through to resignation, criminal prosecution and imprisonment. This narrative fits with the analysis by White (2016) of the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee's public shaming of G4S following their bungled Olympics security contract. There is, however, also the possibility that a scandal loses energy and fades out of view (Thompson 2000).

Drawing on these three key phases, we aim to track the life course of two recent scandals, exposing in particular the self-presentations of private security elites as they attempt to repair

legitimacy. In so doing, our analysis reveals the conflicting norms of public morality which are at stake once a scandal breaks.

Methodological approach

Our theoretical assumptions about scandals influenced both our investigation and analysis of the two scandal cases. In each of our cases, we have traced the scandals *as they evolved in the media*, beginning with their eruption through to the scandal proper and subsequent closure. As noted, contemporary scandals are, in essence, mediatized because publicity is a necessary condition for an act of transgression to evolve into a scandal (Greer and McLaughlin 2010, 2013; Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008; Thompson 1995, 2000). Hence, we regard scandals as constituted partly by the acts (of transgression) at heart of the scandal and partly by ‘the speech-acts of others who respond to these acts’ (Thompson 1997: 44). Such responses are in fact ‘integral to the scandal, not retrospective commentaries on it’ (Ibid: 44). Furthermore, we regard the media as both an arena for disclosures, claims, accusations and comments, and as an *actor in itself*, in depicting what is claimed to have happened as dubious or unmoral. To some extent, the media creates the scandal that would not have existed in its absence. When, having come to a close, the scandal can and should, for analytical purposes, be traced retrospectively. Such is our purpose in this article.

In the Swedish case, we explore a scandal in which private security officers, the private security company employing them and, to some extent, the police are held to account for the use of excessive force against a young Arab asylum seeker at the central train station in a city in the southern parts of Sweden. The state owned company contracting the security company involved in the scandal operates train stations in Sweden (Jernhusen). According to its website, the security work at the train stations is characterised by zero-tolerance against insecurity, motivating the use of camera surveillance and private security officers (*ordningsvakter*) patrolling the stations to ensure that travellers and visitors feel safe and secure. The contracted security officers (*ordningsvakter*) are trained, authorised, and under the command of the state police. As such, security officers have the authority to deny a person entry to a specific location, remove a person by reasonable force, as well as detain and restrain with handcuffs while awaiting the arrival of the police.

In the British case, we draw on a recent BBC documentary, *Panorama*, which exposes staff verbally and physically abusing young people at a private prison in the South of England. The scandal centres on G4S, a global giant in the private security industry. The G4S youth prison

case builds on a catalogue of previous scandals, including the failure to provide enough private security guards for the 2012 London Olympics, the shutting down of Israeli prison operations following pressure from human rights campaigners, and where G4S staff in Lincolnshire, England, boosted performance figures by making hundreds of fake calls to a 999 centre run by the firm. The personnel at the heart of the Medway scandal worked as Prison Custody Officers (PCOs) in the custodial and detention services. The stated duties of PCOs include controlling the internal and external movements of prisoners, searching prisoners, cells and premises, confiscating prohibited items, helping prisoners to address offending behaviour whilst reinforcing positive behaviour, and supporting and protecting prisoners who are experiencing difficulties and/or abuse. PCOs are also expected to contribute to the control of incidents and emergencies when required, as well as complete and maintain prisoner records. Using force to discipline those in their care goes against the terms of their contracts with the government, which states that it can only be used as a last resort to prevent injury or damage. It should be noted that, for the most part, private security agents – including those contracted by the state - do not have special police powers, only those of any citizen who has the right to use force when it is necessary and proportionate to do so. However, the personnel in the Medway case have been awarded statutory powers as part of their custody officer role under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Likewise, the type of security officers involved in the Swedish scandal do have limited police powers.

Thus, within our analysis, a categorical distinction should be made between private policing and private prisons, both of which provide contentious examples of the marketisation of core state activities. While the contexts and countries of the scandals are different, they both involve private security companies and their employees contracted to perform public sector functions in the realm of policing and criminal justice. While the officers in the Swedish case adopt more of an obvious policing role, the UK case involves privatised social control professionals operating in a closed institution. Our rationale for the choice of the two case studies is that they are two recent, high-profile scandals involving major private security companies which add further to the taint of the industry as a whole (Loader *et al* 2011). Our examination also needs to be understood against the backdrop of the paradoxical position of private security in western liberal democratic countries. This is a context in which private security is cast, on the one hand, ‘as an ordinary private enterprise’, yet, on the other hand, as an ‘usurper of the state’s law and order functions’ (White 2016: 172). In taking the latter position, security provision is viewed as the exclusive preserve of the state, a public good that cannot be delivered by a private enterprise. In following the life course of the two scandals, we have reconstructed both the

critical public discourse intensifying during the scandal, and the neutralisations that private security elites present to repair legitimacy and deflect negative attention. As White (2016) notes, critical public discourse – channelled through the national media – is a potent accountability mechanism. The security industry fears negative media attention as it threatens to tarnish the brand of companies (and broader industry), often leading to emotive calls for ‘something to be done’ (ibid: see also Livingstone and Hart 2003). However, and as our analysis indicates, the damage to the industry may be counteracted by supportive public discourse belonging to quite another norm audience. What consequences the scandal brings - and why - are matters for empirical exploration.

The core data we use is the publicly available news material about the Swedish and UK scandals. We also analyse texts produced by the private security companies at the heart of the scandals, as well as those produced by other security industry actors such as professional associations. In the first step of the analysis we, for each case, mapped how the discreditable conduct came to light, the key details at the heart of the scandal, audience responses or the critical public discourse, as well as how elites within the industry sought to deflect negative attention, explain the event and take remedying action. In this first step we also found traces of a parallel, subordinate, but supportive public discourse, which mattered to the story, and our data.¹ In the second step of analysis we adopted a critical interpretist approach (Layder 1997), examining not only *what* was written, but also *how* the acts of transgression were framed. When analysing the public response, we reconstructed different and clashing moral codes and norms of morality. In the final step of the analysis, we identify the aftermath of the scandals and the consequences for those involved. The evidence we present here – namely, in the form of audience and security elite responses - rests on two case studies, raising potential implications for the generalizability of the study. Yet, we would emphasise that the international comparisons between the UK and Swedish scandals should increase confidence in the findings.

A Swedish Scandal

The Eruption Phase

The event that later became a public scandal took place on February 6, 2015. On this Friday evening, two security officers patrolling the central train station in Malmö received a phone

¹ All media excerpts pertaining to the Swedish case was originally published in Swedish, but was translated by Cecilia Hansen Ljöfstrand as they were included in the data set.

call from a train attendant about two young boys who had been found on the train about to depart to Copenhagen. Since they did not have tickets, they were denied access to the train. The two officers found the boys sitting on a bench and approached them. The boys had travelled from Morocco to Sweden without parents and spoke only Arabic and a little English. It was later revealed that they were nine and twelve years of age. Since the boys were young and unaccompanied, the officers phoned the police, and were asked to hold the two boys until a police patrol arrived. This decision was taken because the boys found on the bench matched the description of two asylum-seeking boys who had been placed by the social services in a treatment institution for children while awaiting the asylum process, but had run away. When the youngest boy realised the police were on their way, he attempted to leave, but was prevented in doing so by the security officers. One officer subsequently used force to keep the boy down on the floor until the police arrived. This was achieved by straddling the boy and covering his mouth. The event was filmed on a mobile phone belonging to one of the spectators who had formed part of a growing audience. When the police patrols arrived to the scene, this person complained about the actions of the officers, and asked the police patrols to watch it. When he felt that he got no response from the police patrols, he sent the footage to *Sydsvenskan*, the major morning newspaper in southern Sweden.

The Scandal Proper

On Monday February 9, 2015, three days after the event, *Sydsvenskan* published the mobile phone footage online, together with an article with the heading ‘Guard pounded a nine-year-old’s head on the ground’. The witness was interviewed in the newspaper article. He reports that the audience screamed to the security officer to stop hurting the boy, while the guards told them to back away. ‘The guard is strangling him. You can see that the boy cannot breathe. He is crying and is totally hysterical’ (*Sydsvenskan* 09/02/15). The witness then says that when the other boy tried to make the security officer stop, officer number two pushed him down on the bench, and stood on his foot so that he could not run. After a while, three police patrols arrived at the scene, and the police officers handcuffed the boy and carried him away. On the day that *Sydsvenskan* published the footage, it was also published on social media. The film has to date been viewed over three million times and the debate that followed was intense.

The scandal that broke revolved around two questions: (a) did the security officers use excessive violence against the lone minors, specifically when restraining the youngest of the boys, to the extent that they could be charged with assault?, and (b) did the police act in a

professional and legally correct way when informed about the incident? In addition to prompting a heated contest about the use of (excessive) violence by security officers and the lack of professionalism of the police, the footage also provoked discussion about immigration and the situation of lone minors seeking asylum in Sweden. The security manager at the state-owned company Jernhusen explained in the same newspaper article:

The guards were told by the police to make them stay put since they were wanted by the police and tried to escape. [...] Guards have the right to use violence as self-defence and when making arrests and detaining people. We have never had any troubles with excessive use of force among the guards that work for us. I think we've only had one incident in five or six years. Now we know that it was two wanted criminals that were arrested. (Sydsvenskan 09/02/15)

A day later this version was challenged in the tabloid newspaper Aftonbladet:

Two wanted criminals, he says. A nine year old and his twelve-year-old friend? Then three police patrols arrived. Three patrols on two children. In Sweden children were transported away handcuffed. [...] The nine-year-old and his friend are now returned to [the place] they ran away from and everybody is apologizing. [...] They are children and not wanted criminals. (10/02/15).

The chief executive of the security company employing the security officers, and contracted by Jernhusen, is quoted in the same article (Sydsvenskan 09/02/15). He says that 'it doesn't look good' but explains that the security officers were instructed by the police to make the boys stay put. He also says that 'our guards have been kicked and bitten.' The reporter asks if the instruction to make the boys stay put motivates the violence used, and the response is:

Not if one considers the film, it's looking bad. But it has happened many times that the situation is not what it looks like in a filmed sequence that somebody has chosen to make available and publish. We need to investigate this and, above all await the police investigation. We completely renounce all unnecessary violence. However, guards do use force to detain and arrest people.

The chief executive of the security company frames the event not as a case of child abuse, but as a case of legal use of violence. Furthermore, the statement that 'the situation is not what it looks like' is an example of one of the commonly used reputation-protection techniques reported by Greer and McLaughlin (2013), where the initial action is denial. The event was also reported, in a very similar manner, in an online news site for those in the security industry. The chief executive there claimed that, according to his employees, the footage did not show what 'really happened' as it had been manipulated. The same day that the scandal broke, the chief of information for the police also denied that the footage shows an assault:

‘What you see is not that the head is pounded on the floor. The boy spits and bites and the guard need to hold his head still. What you see on the film is not abuse. The guard has the authority to do what you can see’. However, this statement led to criticism from an expert on law: ‘He must be viewing this film with completely different eyes than me. It is very problematic to jump to conclusions before a preliminary investigation has been completed’ (Svenska Dagbladet 09/02/15).

The day after the scandal broke there were media reports about members of the public arranging mass demonstrations in two major cities in Sweden. These were carried out the same day together with Rädda Barnen (Save the Children), whose secretary general stated: ‘It doesn’t matter what has happened, one cannot arrest children like this’ (Svenska Dagbladet 10/02/15). A public inquiry into the excessive use of violence by the police and private security officers was even demanded during a speech as part of the demonstration. Thus, the public norm at stake here morphed into animated debate about the use of excessive violence by both private security and the public police as agents of the state. This can be interpreted as the initial stages of an amplification process since the transgressions of individuals became connected with broader allegations of systemic and institutional failure (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). The same day, the police announced that a preliminary investigation was to be initiated. Furthermore, the National Police Chief called for an evaluation of the training of security officers with regards to intervening in incidents involving children (Dagens Nyheter 10/02/15). Yet it is notable that he refrains from commenting on the involvement of the police in the scandal process, instead using the symbolic authority of the police to deflect attention onto the shortcomings of the security industry .

The concern about what would have happened if the incident had not been recorded was shared by many writers debating the limits of private policing. One such writer demanded increased inspections of security companies, arguing that this is not a case of a few ‘bad apples’, but a lack of transparency in the internal affairs of the industry and superficial inspections of security companies:

This is not a sustainable arrangement when the trend is that private companies are taking over more and more of what used to be tasks of the police [...] especially when publicly owned institutions are buying their services. (Aftonbladet 11/02/15)

The Swedish Home Secretary, Anders Ygeman, was interviewed for Sydsvenskan, stating that he felt ‘an immense aversion’ after having seen the film, but since the preliminary investigation was still ongoing, he would not comment on the innocence or guilt of the security

officers. In response to the journalist's question about whether the violence used was within the law, and the possibility of an inappropriate esprit de corps between police and private security officers, he responded:

I don't think so. It shouldn't be the case. Of course it is the duty of the police to train the security officers. However, I think that police officers understand this kind of difficult situation better – they understand that there may be additional images of reality than those immediately made available, since they in the exercise of their profession are victims of violence and are forced to use violence to manage those situations. (Sydsvenskan 11/02/15)

The culture of solidarity is thus depicted as based on common victimhood; police and private security officers are portrayed as victims of violence who are, at times, themselves forced to respond with violence. In contrast, other audiences criticised the police for deflecting allegations of child abuse on the part of the security officers, and for covering their backs (Expressen 10/02/15). The police were criticized for initially stating that there were no grounds for a preliminary investigation, arousing fierce criticism from Save the Children and public criminologist/crime-fiction author, Leif GW Persson, who questioned whether events would have been different if the two boys looked like 'Nils Holgersson' (Aftonbladet 11/02/15), a blond and blue eyed little boy made famous in a book by the distinguished Swedish author and Nobel prize winner Selma Lagerlöf.

The security company at the heart of the scandal stated on its website that the individual security officers had been removed from duty in light of the preliminary police investigation, and that an internal investigation was ongoing. What was at stake was whether the incident was a case of child abuse or an act of legal restraint by security officers. Representatives of the Transport Union defended the actions of their members, stating that this should not be regarded as a case of illegitimate or excessive force. To hold a hand over the mouth of a person, it was explained, is a normal procedure to ensure that the person detained cannot hurt himself or the security officer:

'It may be the case when apprehending troublesome persons. It sounds awful but they are only doing their job.' (Dagens Nyheter 10/02/15).

The second day after the scandal broke the spokesperson of the interest organization of Swedish private security companies SäkerhetsBranschen (The Security Industry) stated his response to the scandal. He opined that:

It is pretty obvious that this is not something you wish for. I've had a look at some numbers. We have 4,000 interventions at [this particular train station] every month. We have 50,000 interventions every month in the industry generally. This [kind of incident] is extremely rare. There are fewer allegations [of misconduct] against us than against the police. (SecurityUser.com 11/02/15).

In this case, industry elites manage the scandal by mobilizing statistics to support the claim that incidents involving excessive use of force are 'extremely rare'. That the security officers (ordningsvakter) have the right to use force even when handling children – if it is justifiable – was discussed in the daily and national morning newspaper Dagens Nyheter, where it was stated that part of the monopoly of violence has been delegated to security officers. According to the police manager of the officers that provide training for security officers (Dagens Nyheter 10/02/15), the question of whether or not the use of violence is justifiable has to be judged from case to case, something that heads-off the possibility that such events are the result of structural flaws or an enabling institutional structure. Over the past three years, The Security Industry has pushed for private security companies to take over more police duties. In the national news program, the spokesperson of the Security Industry claimed that it would be better if the responsibility for the training of security officers (ordningsvakter) was transferred from the police to the industry itself.

The scandal was also amplified in another way. Whereas experts, journalists and criminologists had pointed mainly towards the unhealthy culture within the security industry, and the profane alliance between the industry and the police, the media began to report racist views of citizens and key representatives of the political system. In particular, the media couched the event in terms an instance of structural racism in Swedish society. For instance, the journal Expo, founded with the aim of informing the public about racism and xenophobia, reported the position of the politician Björn Söder, representing the right-wing nationalist party, The Sweden Democrats, who declared his dissatisfaction with media reports related to the published film on his official Facebook account, arguing that the media concealed what really happened. Söder's comment box was quickly filled with racist comments against the boy and calls for violence. Examples include:

'A... small prospective explosive belt expert?', 'this was a lone minor, but soon his relatives arrive here in bunches', and, 'such a small beast grows up to become a monster' [...] 'the guards did their job and nothing else' (Expo 13/02/15).

We can detect two sets of norms of public morality in the Swedish case. The scandal was initially framed by a view which sees children as especially vulnerable with the right to be protected from all forms of violence. In line with this view, the event was depicted as a case of illegal and morally reprehensible child abuse carried out by over-zealous officers who form part of an industry beset by a problematic culture. But later in the scandal proper phase this view came to be contested by another set of norms depicting ‘foreign’ or asylum-seeking children as criminals who deserved what they got from both private security and police officers. In this ultimately triumphant version, the officers are held up as heroes simply doing their job defending the people and interests of Sweden. For instance, in the article, ‘The children who awakened the haters’ (Sydsvenskan 14/02/15), the author reviews the comments made online by the public, writing that:

In hundreds, perhaps thousands, of comments, the nine year old and his twelve-year-old half-brother are portrayed as two hardened professional criminals who have gone berserk on the train platform and in the waiting hall, who kicked the passengers, spat on attendants, bitten a little girl and robbed an old lady, and finally - completely unprovoked - tried to kick and head-butt a security guard. [...] The nine-year old child is attributed animal characteristics, and the guard is hailed for his resourceful intervention.

This narrative arose late in the scandal proper in a bid to counter the claim about excessive violence. But it also demonstrates a broader set of sensibilities about the threat posed by asylum-seekers and what the criminal justice system should legitimately be permitted to do in response. At this point in time, a longer film (than the original) was obtained from the surveillance cameras at the train station. The longer film sequence was also commented on by public criminologist Leif GW Persson who then, in direct contravention to earlier statements, claimed the security officer did nothing wrong. Persson claimed that the boy goes ‘crazy’ only after he had learned that the police had been called to the scene – ‘it’s only then that he starts fighting, biting and spitting, and that’s when the guard holds his hand over his mouth’ (Expressen 10/03/15; see also Aftonbladet 10/03/15). This depiction of the lone minor as the wrongdoer, and the violence used by the security guards as proportional, provided further legitimacy to the debate.

The Phase of Closure

A month later the prosecutor in charge of the preliminary investigation announced that all inquiries would be dropped and that the security officers involved would not be prosecuted because, as they saw it, the violence used was justified (Sydsvenskan 20/04/15; Expressen 20/04/15; Aftonbladet 20/04/15). The legal representative of the nine-year-old boy (from the

Danish Red Cross) argued that this decision confirmed the legal uncertainty faced by asylum-seekers in Europe. Almost six months later, the two security officers are interviewed for an article in their union newspaper, the only interview they have agreed to do. They explained how the scandal reproduced a stigmatizing image of the private security occupation:

Luckily our names were not made public, but threats were made towards ‘those guards’ and people came to the train station looking for us. Security officers in the whole of the security industry have had to take crap for what happened [...] The general public’s view of our occupation has always been very negative. The typical image depicts security guards as persons who have failed at getting into the Police Academy (Transportarbetaren 01/10/15).

With the preliminary investigation dropped, the security officers portray themselves as simply doing their job and as victims of public scorn who have to deal with a potentially violent public (see also Hansen Löftstrand et al 2015). It is telling that the security officers are reproducing a well-known trope of police culture, presenting their social world as one which teeters on the edge of chaos and in which officers have to deal with a demanding and ungrateful public (Loftus 2009). As a direct result of the scandal, the company at the heart of the controversy now equip their security officers with body-worn cameras in order to provide ‘proof’ when accused of wrongdoing (Transportarbetaren 01/10/15).

A British Scandal

The Eruption phase

On 11 January 2016, the BBC current affairs documentary *Panorama* broadcast the programme ‘Teenage Prison Abuse Exposed’. The documentary transpired because a former employee at a private youth prison in South England, ‘Medway Secure Training Centre’, disclosed concerns about PCOs physically abusing those young people submitted to their care. Acting upon the information provided by the whistle-blower, an undercover journalist joined Medway as a member of staff with the intention of covertly filming instances of assault and excessive use of force. The private security company running Medway, G4S, had been contracted by the UK government since the early 2000s with the stated aim to rehabilitate and provide education for the young prisoners, for which it has been paid over £10 million in public money (BBC News 12/01/16).

The Scandal Proper

The documentary revealed episodes of physical assault and unnecessary use of force by PCOs. Footage also exposed a deliberate tactic of carrying out the assaults beneath CCTV cameras or in areas not covered by them. The actions uncovered related to ten boys, ranging in age from 14 to 17 and included: slapping a teenager several times in the head; pressing heavily on the necks of young people; using restraint techniques unnecessarily (including squeezing the windpipe of one boy so he had problems breathing); using swearing to frighten and intimidate; and boasting about mistreating young people, including using a fork to stab one boy in the leg and making another cry uncontrollably (BBC News 12/01/16).

The contents of the documentary were seized by all of the major news outlets and, like the Swedish case, were aired on YouTube, Facebook and heavily debated on Twitter. In the immediate aftermath, it was reported that both the police and the Youth Justice Board (YJB) would be initiating independent investigations, and there was also much outrage from third sector services and charities. The Howard League for Penal Reform tweeted that the allegations were ‘extremely concerning’, adding that it had legal clients at the prison. In a personal capacity its CEO, Frances Crook, added that the events uncovered by the BBC demanded public concern and that:

Watching this programme made me cry. The deliberate cruelty against children was one of the most upsetting things I have seen in this country. Shocking also was the institutionalised fraud being perpetrated to cover up that abuse (Howard League 12/01/16).

While the dominant narrative to emerge framed the children as a highly vulnerable group with the right to be protected from all forms of violence, other less sympathetic views were expressed by members of the public. For instance, on the BBC *Panorama* Facebook page, some commentators unequivocally view the children as criminals who deserved the abuse. As one person states:

Now, wonder why these little bastards end up inside? They're criminals and the BBC support them, the little cunts deserve a hiding [...] Maybe if they hadn't been unruly little bastards in the first place. Let's not forget these little fuckers are there for a reason! *Panorama*, you should be ashamed (11/01/2015).

As Thompson (2000) notes, responses to scandals vary significantly. The above extract reflects an important and immediate counter-narrative, defending the use of force and expressing moral outrage towards the documentary makers for capturing and airing the abuse. In the days that

followed, it was announced that during the police and the YJB investigations, the Medway Centre would not be permitted to take any further children. Moreover, prominent politicians hastily waded into the debate to condemn the events, including the then Shadow Home Secretary Andy Burnham MP, who stated that if the external investigations revealed that the allegations were true, then G4S should be ‘stripped of its contract to run Medway and other Secure Training Centres’ (The Guardian 10/01/16). It was also reported that the (then) Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, was to hold an emergency meeting with G4S officials ‘to discuss the allegations and to review their response’ (ibid.). Since the government was responsible for tendering out the running of Medway to G4S, the scandal became political - forcefully bringing to light the contested nature of private security and its alignment with public services and criminal justice. For Thompson (2000), the consequences of scandals are the unravelling of the connections between reputation and trust and so the emerging attempts by politicians to shape public debate may not be wholly surprising.

The airing of the documentary provoked damning rejoinders from key bodies within the criminal justice system. Responding to the claim that some officers deliberately failed to report two or more clients fighting because it indicates a loss of control, potentially resulting in a fine, Nick Hardwick, the Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that:

I think this is a very serious allegation, and that is something [that] needs to be specifically investigated. If that is the case, and if that was done with the knowledge of managers at G4S, then I think that would be a very serious thing for them to have to answer. I think it would be very disturbing (BBC News 12/01/16).

There was a widespread call that all children in Medway should be found other places immediately because the institution was ‘rotten to the core’ (Howard League 12/01/16). Along with calling for the G4S contract to be rescinded, there were also demands for a financial penalty:

The government ought to explore whether G4S should repay the taxpayers money it has received in the last few years. It has been paid to look after children, and it has failed [...] Both the secure training centres and the sentences designed to put children in them were flawed from the start. Over the years we have seen enough problems at the secure training centres to confirm that they are failed institutions for a failed sentence (Frances Cook, ibid.).

At this point, we can demarcate a clear example of deviancy amplification (Cohen 1985), where the reported case of excessive use of force by individual officers are represented as part of a much larger and pervasive problem - an assertion that is almost impossible to disprove in the

immediate aftermath of a scandal (Greer and McLaughlin 2013). In particular, the 2016 documentary awakened older concerns about what was seen to be systemic problems in privately run secure training centres. The youth centres were introduced in the late 1990s alongside the Detention and Training Order, a short prison sentence for children followed by supervision in the community. Yet, as the above comments make clear, their creation was viewed as a failure waiting to happen. The Guardian (26/02/16) published an article entitled, ‘Revealed: G4S youth jail faced abuse claims 12 years ago’, arguing that as far back as 2003 whistle-blowers at Medway had disclosed that front-line personnel abused children in their care, but that ‘no significant action appears to have been taken as a result of the complaint’. Deborah Cole, Director of the charity Inquest, argued that in any other setting the treatment ‘would be child abuse’. Adding fuel to the amplification spiral, she also suggests:

That it took undercover filming to reveal the mistreatment of imprisoned children points to the culpable failure of monitoring and oversight by the YJB and G4S [...] Following the deaths of two children in 2004 following the use of force, assurances were made that the culture and practices would be changed and yet the abuses continue. This points to a lack of accountability and culture of impunity. It is clear that these institutions are incapable of reform and must be closed down (BBC News 08/01/16).

The Howard League (12/01/16) also noted that in 2012 a High Court judge ruled that the unlawful use of restraint had been widespread in privately-run secure training centres for at least a decade. The Howard League legal team has since worked with adults who were detained there as children and who have subsequently raised concerns about their treatment. The Medway children who have been assisted by the Howard League legal team include teenagers who were violently restrained on numerous occasions and often called names (ibid.). It was also pointed out that, invariably, complaints are not upheld because of a lack of CCTV corroborating evidence. However, as noted, the *Panorama* episode included footage of violent incidents involving officers that took place deliberately away from the view of CCTV. The dredging up of these earlier cases of abuse within youth prisons run by G4S is integral for inflaming the current scandal since it implicates and exposes failings not within a single time period, but also historically. Indeed, the Medway scandal also revived another case, this time in relation to forced removals in which G4S officers are hired by the state to deport foreign nationals. Angolian, Jimmy Mubenga, collapsed and died while being deported on a commercial flight in 2010. As the Institute of Race Relations makes clear, the ensuing investigation brought to light a culture of violence and racism among G4S personnel (13/02/14).

In the immediate aftermath of the *Panorama* documentary, the managing director of children's services at G4S, Paul Cook, gave a televised interview stating that he was 'shocked and appalled' after the airing of the programme, and that he 'would like to apologise personally to any young people involved in these incidents'. Confronted with incontrovertible evidence of violent conduct, the human face of G4S chose to bestow a public apology. As McLaughlin and Greer (2013) remind us, many public figures have only intensified the 'trial by media' - and related public criticism - by continually denying the event. Yet, G4S did employ a recognised technique of reputation protection - denial of the knowledge of the event of action (ibid.). While Cook claimed that G4S was unaware of the abuse before *Panorama* sent the documentary to them, it is noteworthy that the undercover journalist informed the audience that G4S subsequently wrote to the BBC to try to prevent broadcast of the footage, arguing that the covert filming was unauthorized and illegal. Moreover, it soon became evident that G4S were intending to disseminate the bad apples theory of the abuse captured in the footage. Condemning the individual officers, Cook stated that:

The wellbeing, safety and care of the young people at Medway is our primary objective, and we are shocked that any member of staff would behave in this way. There is no place for the conduct shown in the programme within any of our Secure Training Centres and it will not be tolerated (BBC News 12/01/16).

He also sought to reassure audiences that an internal investigation was underway. A more senior member of G4S – Peter Neden, the regional president for UK and Ireland - also provided official comment:

Our secure training centres are open to a range of independent professionals, from care workers, to Bernardos, The NHS and Youth Justice Board, who observe the young people on site and the behavior of our staff on a daily basis. Under G4S management these centres have received positive recognition from inspecting bodies, with over a dozen inspections rating them as 'outstanding'. We continue to support the work of the newly appointed Ministry of Justice improvement board to address the very serious issues raised at the Medway secure training unit (The Guardian 26/02/16).

This is a clear attempt to repair the legitimacy gap created by the scandal. Neden emphasizes the principle of external oversight to deflate the image of a closed institution in which systemic abuse occurs. Importantly, and in a similar vein to the spokesperson of the interest organisation of the Swedish security industry, the regional president of G4S does not *deny* excessive use of force. Rather, by stressing previous positive feedback in connection with multiple inspections, and an overall favourable reputation, he (implicitly) communicates that what has happened

should not be understood as normal business, or the product of an enabling institutional structure.

In the end, however, elite attempts to restore confidence in G4S proved unsuccessful. In March 2016, G4S announced the sale of its UK children's services business, including its contracts to run two youth prisons (The Guardian 07/03/16). This announcement followed an investigation by the Ministry of Justice into the accuracy of figures indicating that no children were injured while being restrained by officers at Medway. In business, reputation is essential to the survival of a company and can be understood as a set of collective perceptions and evaluations, developed by stakeholders and facilitated by the process of corporate branding, which favour the company against its competitors (Roberts and Dowling 2002). The practices of G4S at Medway became designated with such moral taint that a section of its core services have to be sold off – amputated due to the risk it posed to the main body of the company. Yet, even then, G4S were keen to highlight that the intentions of the company has always been, and still are, very good. For example, another corporate quote stated that, 'The wellbeing and education of the children in our care will remain a priority until such time as an orderly transition to a new operator has been completed' (Financial Times 26/03/16). However, the scandal provided reformers with an opportunity to call into question the very existence of secure training centres, with the Howard League arguing that withdrawal from the market by G4S should not be followed up by new private security companies coming in to simply replace them. Repeated assertions in the media that the centres were 'failed models' added to the public humiliation of G4S.

The Phase of Closure

Following the broadcast of the *Panorama* documentary, the Youth Justice Board stated that it had immediately increased its monitoring of the Medway centre and also enhanced the presence of its independent advocacy service. Politicians also remained co-opted into the scandal. The then Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, subsequently informed the House of Commons that despite the revelations about Medway, G4S were doing a 'good job' at other institutions (BBC News 17/01/16). As noted, there are very real political consequences of the Medway scandal, not least its capacity to disrupt and derail state plans to privatise core functions of criminal justice. Along with the televised apology, G4S sacked the five officers seen in the covert footage. Furthermore, three members of personnel were suspended and another placed on restricted duties. The acting director of the Medway unit also stood down. Four of the Medway officers were subsequently arrested on suspicion of child neglect but, at the time of writing,

have been released on bail with the police investigation ongoing. One significant development was that the government later announced that the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) would officially take over Medway from G4S (BBC News 05/05/16). In June 2016, it was reported that the investigation had deepened after five new arrests were made, this time on suspicion of misconduct in public office (The Guardian 09/06/16). In August 2016, an Ofsted report further reprehended the running of Medway by G4S, rating the centre ‘inadequate’ in five of the eight categories inspected.² The key finding was that levels of violence were high, particularly against staff, and that oversight of the use of force and restraint was poor (BBC News 08/08/16). Inspectors also found evidence that violence against children and staff was under-reported. Indeed, staff were unable to provide inspectors with accurate records of the number of children requiring medical treatment as a result of assaults or fights (ibid). This new wave of criticism provided another opportunity for interest groups, such as the Howard League, to renew its call for secure training centres to be closed down. In response to the report, the managing director of G4S custodial and detention services focused on the fallout of the documentary – rather than the original actions of its personnel – to explain the contents of the report:

This was clearly a period of intense disruption which created uncertainty and instability for the young people and staff at the centre and it proved extremely challenging to maintain appropriate staffing levels and standards (BBC News 08/08/16).

These latest developments indicate an intensification of the seriousness of inquiries into Medway, although the police investigation continues to concentrate on individual members of the organisation. As Thompson (2000) demonstrates, scandals can have severe repercussions for the lives and careers of those involved in them - sometimes more so than for the institutions of which those individuals are part.

Conclusion

In this article we have examined two recent scandals concerning the deviant practices of private security officers operating in different settings. In tracing these events we documented the methods private security elites use in order to deflect the negative attention, restore reputation and repair legitimacy. Managers and chief executives may choose a low profile approach in relation to some stakeholders and audiences, particularly when the external threat to legitimacy

² Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. The governmental organisation inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

is severe and the organization concludes that a more activist stance will prove fruitless. Alternatively, they may deliberately engage external stakeholders and condemners in an attempt to change perceptions of the occupation and broader industry. Once a private security scandal has come to an end, it does not necessarily mean that the legitimacy gap has been closed – or even that the legitimacy has been repaired. For the private security industry, reputation is a most valuable resource, even more so when its policing and criminal justice functions are contracted by public sector institutions.

One aim of our article was to describe and understand social reactions to, and representations of, transgressions by the private security industry. Although both scandals stained that industry, competing narratives regarding the *extent* of damage were evident. In Sweden, reaction to the event reflected both outrage and defensiveness. The introduction of the defensive narrative was in the end influential in closing down the scandal, and politicians managed to evade blame. In the British scandal, however, there was clearly a dominant narrative of moral outrage, led by vocal interest groups, leading ultimately to acute repercussions for G4S. From the outset, politicians waded hastily into the debate as the scandal forcefully brought into focus the contested nature of private security and its alignment with criminal punishment. In the face of private security scandals, the actions of government representatives are characteristically ambivalent and contradictory. On the one hand, political elites understate events since they are acutely aware of their role as delegators. Yet, on the other hand, they carefully express condemnation and determination to ‘bring to justice’ wrongdoers. Although both scandals contained serious allegations of systematic flaws, events were framed as peculiar occasions of misconduct among individual officers, thereby effacing the wider politics of private security. To this extent, our research underlines the potential for applying to private security the kind of principled, ethical approach that has in recent years been demanded of the public police (Neyroud 2011).

Private security scandals are an episodic social phenomena which can mobilize a distinctive emotional response, resulting (sometimes) in acute consequences. In analysing the public response, or outrage, we have reconstructed a host of wider and competing moral codes. Although the children were understood as worthy victims who were unjustly assaulted, another set of norms revile them as hardened criminals deserving of abuse by the authorities. Other concerns are also detected in the public response – notably, that the scandals revealed discontent around thorny issues of immigration, policing and the position of asylum seekers in the Swedish case, and the controversy of youth prisons in the British example.

It is reasonable to suppose that the more the private security industry assumes public functions, the more it runs the risk of becoming embroiled in the moral dramas and legitimation contests documented here. One common worry among critics about the privatisation of policing – and prisons - is that market actors re-shape those institutions with an amoral economic logic of efficiency, cost-cutting, and profit-seeking. But when market players take on public police functions, or enter the domain of criminal punishment, that is not all that happens. What markets actors and logic cannot do is supplant the moral tensions, trade-offs and conflicts, and the attendant social struggles over meaning, that policing and criminal justice inescapably entails. In so far as this is true, market actors operating in policing and prisons also get *re-shaped* by having entered into that terrain: they are subject to its cultural and moral logics and one way or another become embroiled in its conflicts. Some of these conflicts are moral battles about the appropriateness of handing over the delivery of violence to the market. But as our article shows, they reach much wider to cover the meanings of excessive force, what we owe to/how we treat young offenders and asylum seekers, and so forth. This is the wider lesson – one about the inescapably moral dimensions of the market for security (Loader et al. 2014) - that these two scandals disclose.

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