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Grudge spending: the interplay between markets and culture in the purchase of security

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Abstract

In the paper, we use data from an English study of security consumption, and recent work in the cultural sociology of markets, to illustrate the way in which moral and social commitments shape and often constrain decisions about how, or indeed whether, individuals and organizations enter markets for protection. Three main claims are proffered. We suggest, firstly, that the purchase of security commodities is a mundane, non-conspicuous mode of consumption that typically exists outside of the paraphernalia of consumer culture – a form of grudge spending. Secondly, we demonstrate that security consumption is weighed against other commitments that individuals and organizations have and is often kept in check by these competing considerations. We find, thirdly, that the prospect of consuming security prompts people to consider the relations that obtain between security objects and other things that they morally or aesthetically value, and to reflect on what the buying and selling of security signals about the condition and likely futures of their society. These points are illustrated using the examples of organizational consumption and gated communities. In respect of each case, we tease out the evaluative judgements that condition and constrain the purchase of security among organizations and individuals and argue that they open up some important but neglected questions to do with the *moral* economy of security.

Keywords: commodification, consumption, culture, markets, moral economy, security

Introduction: what is the purchase of security?

We inhabit a world of commodified security. Services and products are now routinely purchased in an effort to protect persons, homes, families, neighbourhoods, identities, spaces, and commercial or organizational interests. It is commonly remarked that in many societies around the world there are more private security guards today than public police officers, though Jean-Paul

Brodeur (2010: 275) finds that ‘strong evidence’ for this claim exists only in Canada, South Africa and the USA. Brodeur points out that the largest and fastest growing component of what is already a large and diverse security industry is not personnel but ‘security products and technology’ (2010: 277). He then mobilizes the concept of the ‘police-industrial complex’ (2010: 305) in order to grasp the scale and reach of seemingly ever-expanding markets for security hardware. So ‘security’ is being bought and sold in abundance today. But what *kind* of purchase is it, and what *purchase* does the idea of a market in security possess? What is the moral and social significance of protective goods in the mentalities and sensibilities of those who buy them, or who are invited to do so? If the marketplace is a ‘multi-vocal site for the affirmation, generation and transformation of meanings’ (Wherry, 2012: 7) what kinds of meanings are in play, and at issue, in the circulation and exchange of security products?

One common answer to these questions is that the coupling of security and consumption has a troubling ratcheting-up effect upon the demand for, and supply of, protection. Several themes can be identified in sociological analyses of this kind. For some authors, the upsurge in private security over recent decades is a product of the state’s failure to assuage the social fears or satisfy the demands for order that neoliberal rule has generated among atomized and insecure citizens (Ericson, 2006). According to this view, those who can afford to do so have been encouraged – in security as elsewhere – to take responsibility for their own protection and break from their dependence on the uniformity and unreliability of state police provision. As Monahan (2010: 2) puts it: ‘The *insecurity subject* anticipates risks and minimizes them through consumption’ (emphasis in original). A related body of social theory has focused on the celebration of consumption and the attendant rise of what Bauman (1988) has called the ‘consumer attitude’ – the idea that one can find an answer to almost any social problem in a shop, or at the click of a mouse. This, the argument runs, has spilled over into security, where one finds anxious consumers shopping for ‘fear-fighting products’ (Bauman, 2006: 7) that will defend their persons, property or neighbourhoods against criminal threat. In both cases, the animating concern is that the building of private ‘bubbles of governance’ (Rigakos and Greener, 2000) will drain resources and legitimacy from public provision. It is further suggested that consumerism and anxiety can together form a toxic, mutually reinforcing mix (Loader, 1999). On this view, markets for security have a strong propensity to expand as fretful citizens-turned-consumers embark on a restless search for the latest products to quench an insatiable desire for order. As fear ‘proves’ and ‘renews’ itself (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 99), and the physical and mental structures of private ordering take root, the bonds of common citizenship are progressively eroded. Monahan (2010: 3) again: ‘Fear and perceptions of insecurity colonize life worlds and spread virally, spawning paranoia and motivating hypervigilance and self-regulation.’

In this paper, we offer an alternative account of the relationship between markets and security, organized around the concept of grudge spending. In so doing, we draw upon materials generated in an English study of the meanings and dynamics of security consumption, the fieldwork for which we conducted in 2007–2009¹. The study entailed in-depth interviews with 28 manufacturers and/or retailers of security goods/services (from local firms to global multinationals) and eight stakeholders/regulators in the security industry who were asked to reflect on the current state and future prospects of the industry. The latter comprised one MP with a long-standing interest in the security industry; two senior police officers; one representative from the Police Federation; two officials of industry associations; one representative from the Association of British Insurers; and one official from the regulatory body, the Security Industry Authority. We also interviewed 14 security managers from large companies or organizations (eg, banks, supermarkets, shopping centres, schools, universities, transport networks) who were responsible for buying and managing their organization's security; a range of representatives from bodies that act as intermediaries between security buyers and sellers (eg, campaign groups, trade unions, professional and trade associations); three housing developers and two members of the planning profession. We also draw on material from four focus group discussions and 12 in-depth individual interviews in which respondents were invited to offer and discuss their experiences of, and views on, purchasing security goods. These respondents all lived or worked in the Oxford area and were a mix of professional and manual workers, and those who had retired. All were home-owners. They were aged between 30 and 75. Finally, we conducted a close reading of marketing materials produced by companies selling security products.

In making sense of our data, we turn to a body of theorizing and research produced by Viviana Zelizer and others working on the cultural sociology of markets (eg, Spillman, 1999; Zelizer, 2011; Wherry, 2012). Zelizer takes issue in general terms with a view that suffuses the critical literature on private security. She objects to the prevalent positions on the relationship of economic to non-economic phenomena which assume that the social world is divided into a realm of rational economic exchange (markets) and separate arenas of sentiment and solidarity (culture). Such a division is typically accompanied by a fear of contagion between these spheres on the grounds that a 'boundless market' (Zelizer, 2011: 368) will colonize and undermine social or personal relations that were formerly free of the 'taint' of monetary exchange (Zelizer, 2005, 2011). Zelizer then proposes an alternative to the 'moral gloom and social vulnerability' (2011: 369) that characterizes this outlook. She calls this the 'multiple markets' (or 'connected lives') approach. This perspective challenges the 'unquestioned premise that once you mediate transactions with markets you will necessarily have uniform, powerful and negative effects' (Zelizer, 2011: 359). Instead, Zelizer and others working on the cultural sociology of economic exchange encourage us to attend to 'certain complexities in the interaction between the market and human values' (Zelizer, 2011: 19) and to

investigate closely the ‘social and moral impact of different kinds of markets and monetary transactions’ (2011: 359). The task, as they see it, is to explore the relationship between what people believe and what they buy, and to analyze how people’s ‘commitments’ (Sen, 1977) shape their dispositions towards what can and cannot be exchanged. This perspective calls on us to examine ‘the cultural frameworks within which market transactions are interpreted’ (Spillman, 1999: 1049) and the kinds of boundary work that individuals practise when evaluating the connections between economic and non-economic social practices.

The findings of the study reported here illustrate well the close interplay between markets and culture and the way in which moral and social commitments shape and often constrain decisions about how, or indeed whether, individuals and organizations enter markets for protection. The analysis proceeds as follows. We suggest, firstly, that the purchase of security commodities is a mundane, non-conspicuous mode of consumption that typically exists outside of the paraphernalia of consumer culture – a form of grudge spending. Secondly, we demonstrate that security consumption is weighed against other commitments that individuals and organizations have and is often kept in check by these competing considerations. We find, thirdly, that the prospect of consuming security prompts people to consider the relations that obtain between security objects and other things that they morally or aesthetically value, and to reflect on what the buying and selling of security signals about the condition and likely futures of their society. This point is illustrated using the examples of organizational consumption and gated communities. In respect of each case, we tease out the evaluative judgements that condition and constrain the purchase of security among organizations and individuals and argue that they open up some important but neglected questions to do with the *moral* economy of security. As the analysis will show, a fuller, more nuanced understanding of markets for security has to attend to a mix of financial calculation, risk assessment and normative evaluation.

Security as non-conspicuous consumption

Nobody goes and buys security the same as they will buy a 39-inch plasma screen TV. It’s not a commodity. It’s . . . what the word? It’s a grudge buy – it’s something they have to do. (*Manager, security company 1*)

In the literature on commodified security a dominant concern is that the purchase of protective goods and services is likely to become ensnared within and fuelled by certain dynamics of modern consumption. Three dimensions of consumer culture are considered relevant in this regard. The first is the claim that consumption is mainly undertaken by individuals who experience it as a realm of autonomy, agency and sovereignty. According to Campbell, modern consumerism is characterized by ‘its unrestrained or unrestricted individualism’ and attaches an extraordinary value to ‘the right of individuals to decide

for themselves which goods and services they consume' (Campbell, 2004: 28). Secondly, consumption is said to be an imaginative realm, a space of 'day-dreaming and fantasizing' (Campbell, 1987: 203) where people are free to form mental projects and anticipate their satisfaction (Hirschman, 1982). Thirdly, consumption is thought to be a key marker of social identity and belonging, a means of expressing subjectivity, signalling one's place within prevailing social hierarchies, and reinforcing or unsettling social boundaries (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984). The worry is that these elements of consumption can combine to generate insatiable appetites for protective commodities.

Our research suggests that the dynamics of security consumption are not much like this. Rather, security is a grudge purchase. This is so for individual consumers. It is also the case for the organizations that make up the vast bulk of the trade in protective goods and services. This is very much the view of the security industry players we interviewed, though it also permeates the outlook of (potential) buyers, as we shall see. Retailers of security typically hold to the view that individuals and organizations 'do not want to invest in security or see it as a benefit' (*Manager, security company 2*). As one security industry representative put it: 'The problem is that people have this attitude of "It'll never happen to me". Companies are the same – "Why would anyone want to rob me? I've got nothing to take"' (*Representative, security industry association*). In respect of individuals, he continued: 'The adage that security is a grudge purchase is correct I think. People don't think [about] security initially. When you buy a house you don't think of security, you just think it looks nice, it's in the right place, the neighbours are nice. What you don't think is – "Well is it secure?"'. In respect of organizations, a retailer of security systems made a similar point: 'The vast majority of people see security, if you're lucky, as a necessary evil, if you're unlucky, as an unnecessary evil. They don't want to spend any money on it because they don't see it adds value to the business' (*Manager, security company 3*). The result, on this view, is a default mode of security 'complacency' (*Manager, security company 3*) that makes people either 'under-spenders' (with insufficient protection against risk) or 'bad-spenders' (purchasing the wrong things), as one security consultant put it.

So what elements make up this idea of 'grudge'? First, people are typically driven to spend on security not out of desire or to signal social status and belonging but by external actors or force of circumstances. Many interviewees spoke of security consumption as being largely 'insurance-driven' (*Manager, security company 1*); one security retailer referred to insurance as a 'very great driving force' in the industry (*Manager, security company 3*). A security manager from a large transport network we interviewed referred to health and safety legislation, specifically s. 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, as an important exogenous driver of his organization's purchase of security.² Others spoke of security spending as reactive, an act typically engaged in 'after the horse has bolted' (*Manager, security company 4*). One security industry representative expressed the point thus: 'One thing that is common is that it

takes a major incident before people put their hands in their pockets and invest' (*Manager, security company 5*).

The second element of grudge spending concerns consumers being highly price-sensitive and reluctant to pay for, or even believe in the existence of, quality goods and services. This view of consumers is widely shared among sellers of security – even if, as we shall see, it is only partially reflected in the outlook of buyers. Yet this pervasive perception of reluctance on the part of consumers to invest in security is a defining feature about the industry, not least because it animates sellers' efforts to raise the risk consciousness of potential buyers and cajole them into investing greater resources in protecting their assets. Many of the industry players we spoke to bemoaned this state of affairs, complaining that 'most companies don't appreciate quality until there's been an incident' (*Manager, security company 2*), or resorting to the refrain that those who 'pay peanuts, get monkeys' (*Manager, security company 6*). Others held the industry to be at least partly responsible; there are, as the director of one security firm put it, 'too many companies who are willing to take on bad work. Too many companies are unwilling to say no' (*Manager, security company 7*). Our interviewees nonetheless shared the view that price-consciousness/quality-scepticism was a stubborn fact about the market for security goods and services. As one manager in a large security firm put it:

It's an extremely competitive market place with people always trying to drive down the price because they don't associate it with creating value. They associate it with being something they have to do. In quite a lot of cases the people buying security are only buying it so they can put a tick in a box and say 'Yes, I've managed that risk, I've managed that risk, I've managed that risk' (*Manager, security company 6*).

It appears, thirdly, that the purchase of security takes place, not by way of advertising, branding and promotions on the part of sellers or 'shopping around' on the part of buyers, but via recommendations transmitted through informal networks (see generally DiMaggio and Louch, 1998). This was the typical experience of the security firms we interviewed. '90 per cent of the work I get is referrals, word of mouth', observed one security consultant. Another spoke of his firm's reliance upon 'referrals, repeat or retained business' (*Manager, security company 8*). Another remarked: 'You gain jobs by reputation . . . If you do a good job, at the golf club, or over a beer, a customer will say "These guys are good"' (*Manager, security company 9*). On the consumer side, the university security managers we interviewed claimed not to respond to 'salesmen' but to rely instead on 'talking to contacts' in other universities. The result, it seems, is an industry that exists largely beyond the 'high street' and the associated paraphernalia of modern consumption: security is 'not a business that invests in retail outlets' and 'rarely features in consumer products reviews' (*representative, Secured by Design*). This indeed was the experience of our research: our attempts to obtain interviews with the Consumers' Association, National Consumer Council, Advertising Standards Authority, Health and Safety Executive and Trading Standards Office were all politely refused on the grounds that

security products have never crossed the radar screens of these organizations. In general, it seems that the standard techniques of modern marketing have little purchase on consumers who are so generally reluctant to spend: 'Because it's a grudge buy, you could do a mail shot, or drop on somebody's doorstep a leaflet that tells them they need to buy an alarm system. They will look at it and say "Why? I don't have a problem"' (*Manager, security company 1*).

These findings about the 'grudge' quality of security spending are scarcely news. They are a cliché of industry talk (for example, in the trade press), and have been a recurrent theme of previous research (Livingstone and Hart, 2003; White, 2010; Mulone, 2013). However, the idea of grudge remains an under-theorized notion that would repay more careful probing. Industry talk about grudge spending commonly takes it to be a consequence of private security's current composition and standing – the result of cowboy firms, low skills and poor reputation. On this view, grudge spending is a contingent problem to be addressed – and solved – by better regulation and greater professionalism. We certainly encountered concerns about the industry among the buyers of security we interviewed. Some complained about being subject to 'over-selling' and to 'spurious claims' regarding security products, or they worried about the 'lack of sophistication in the sales force' (*Security manager, large supermarket*). Another buyer worried about 'the face of the industry being the worst paid person they've got', something that risks 'compromising the whole damn thing' (*Security manager, major bank*). This representative from a major transport network also had concerns about the quality of staff, something he thought was not necessarily related to the price being paid or the size of the company employed:

You know, we're paying good money for the contracts and they're employing sub-contractors at the cheapest possible rate, and the quality isn't there. And that's the perception of the industry. We get people asleep because they're students all day and they're doing this to make ends meet. . . . And it doesn't matter about the size of the organization either. We've used some of the biggest players, providing security to a number of our depots. Same problem you know, same problem. Quality on the ground.

Problems such as these no doubt contribute to the grudge quality of spending on security, and to what may have become a vicious circle of low pay – poor quality – bad reputation. But this, in our view, is a surface dimension of the phenomenon. The restraint on trade that the notion of grudge presents is not simply a contingent outcome of the industry's current levels of service and status. It is more profoundly the consequence of what one might term the *double intangibility of security*. Potential consumers of security are faced with the intangibility of risk (the problem of knowing precisely how at risk they are and from what source) as well as the intangibility of protection (the problem of knowing whether the good or service on offer can or will mitigate that risk). As the security manager for a large transport network put it: 'It's difficult to

make a business case for prevention. How do you cost something that you've prevented? It's very difficult'.

This intangibility is a basic and inescapable social fact about security – one that a better regulated, more professional security industry would continue to face. It generates two of the constitutive features of grudge as a restraining disposition towards the purchase of security. Firstly, it gives rise to a generic reluctance to spend (for fear of spending too much, too proactively): 'People don't want to invest in something that might happen, but then again it might not' (*security industry representative*). Secondly, it creates a generic wariness about the claims made by those selling security services and products: 'You can be a very good salesman about things. But there must also be proof of effectiveness of the measure that you're taking. You don't want a member to waste money, you know. That is why they are very cautious' (*representative, national retail organization*).³ This dilemma, and the way in which it shapes the purchase of security, is nicely captured by the security manager of a large shopping mall:

Those who pay for it grudgingly do so in the main because you cannot prove its success in terms of deterring or preventing crime. It's a bit like a police officer walking down the street. You're going to pay, I don't know, £30000 for a police officer and he walks for a year down Oxford High Street. How many crimes has he prevented for £30000? Nobody knows. So if a store spends £5000 on the CCTV and alarm system and the store is broken into and the burglar is arrested as a result of the equipment then it is £5000 well spent. If that company doesn't spend £5000 on a burglar alarm or CCTV and it doesn't get broken into what's the point on spending £5000 on security measures?

What emerges from the foregoing discussion is that security is a form of non-conspicuous consumption (Shove and Warde, 1998). The purchase of security is a mundane, unglamorous, symbolically light practice that exists largely outside the apparatus of modern consumer culture – shops, brands, advertising and the 'talkability' (Molotch, 2005) that is both part of the pleasure of shopping and a means for people to 'check' on the social acceptability of the products they are consuming. Buying security seems instead to be understood as a necessary additional 'investment' in the conditions that enable one's individual or collective projects to go on – an investment to which one devotes no more time, resources, or mental/emotional energy than is required. It is in these terms akin to buying insurance or having one's car serviced – a mode of provisioning that may be essential to the stable ordering of things but is seldom, if ever, a source of imaginative pleasure, a means of affirming status and marking social difference, or 'an idiom for expressing core values' (Miller, 2012: 52). Rather than shaping the production of values and identity, markets for security are more often shaped by them.

Keeping (security) things in proportion

Grudge spending is, however, still *spending*. Our interviewees typically recognized that individuals and organizations should bear some level of responsibility for the security of their person and/or property and that this may entail spending money on that purpose. As the security manager of a major supermarket chain put it: 'Our objective is to have a safe and secure environment as free as possible from criminal threat, and that requires a range of people'. The security manager of a major transport network remarked in similar terms: 'Everybody knows that we've got a corporate responsibility to create an environment that is safe and healthy, and we, each of us, have an individual responsibility to contribute to that'. It is, in short, commonly recognized that security is a basic organizational imperative, akin to 'cutting the grass', as one local authority security manager put it.

The point about *grudge* spending has to do with the evident reluctance to over-invest resources, time or energy in security, or to bear too great a share of the overall protective burden. So what forms of restraint bear on the question of whether and how to purchase security? Against what competing commitments is the purchase of security judged and kept in some kind of proportion?

The first and principal thing against which security has to compete in commercial organizations is the profit motive. While security is widely seen as a necessary investment in creating and sustaining the infrastructure that enables profits to be generated, it is also a potential – and potentially wasteful – drain on profits. At the very least, it is an investment that must compete with (and may sometimes lose out to) other commercial imperatives. Against this backdrop, the security managers we interviewed tended not to have dedicated budgets or delegated authority to spend on protective services and equipment; instead, they had to 'present a business case and a strategy to the board' (*Head of security, major bank*). As Mulone (2013) points out, this makes security managers not buyers of security but *sellers of the idea of buying security* to those at the top of corporate hierarchies.⁴ Some saw their role in this regard as engaging in 'an education process' with the company board (*Head of security, major supermarket*) or instilling a 'pro-security culture' in the organization (*Security manager, National Health Service*). Another saw his role as trying to ensure that 'we don't compromise on security' during an economic downturn (*Head of security, major bank*) – a view which intimates that security spending may be high on the list of items that companies cut during periods of austerity. In each respect, security managers recognized that the task of selling security to the board could be an uphill struggle:

If you wear the hat of a retailer what you don't want is all these ancillary costs which add to the totality of your cost and therefore put pressure on your profit margin. How a retailer thinks is 'How little can I spend to sell this product at the cheapest possible price?' They don't think like criminologists and they certainly don't think like police officers in doing that. My strategy is to determine where the vulnerabilities lie. And

my sort of preferred tactic is to get the board to agree that this is a real and present danger and that prescient action now will prevent a disaster further down the line.
(*Security manager of a major supermarket*)

The profit motive is not, however, the only restraint on organizational security purchasing. The level and kind of protective services and equipment consumed is also shaped by, in tension with, and may be subordinated to the wider purposes and priorities of any given organization. The importance of this overall purpose and the constraints it imposes on security practices were explained in the following terms by the security head of a major transport network: 'Even in relation to the particular risk that we saw on 7/7, the practical measures that you can take are limited. They really are. Our principal function is to transport London, and we have to bear that in mind.' Often, these wider organizational priorities give shape to the kinds of security products that are purchased; they make purchasers think hard about the 'fit' between security and the environment it is intended to protect. One of the university security managers we interviewed emphasized the importance of security systems being 'unobtrusive and easy for those who have a right to come in to use', giving the example of a newly installed access control system that was 'visually unobtrusive' and 'as aesthetically pleasing as possible'. Another spoke of the problems that can be caused when security fails to meet these criteria, as in the environment of a student residence: 'Making sure the staircase doors are locked all the time is a bit of an imposition on people's way of life actually. It's a damn nuisance if your friends want to come and see you'. These tensions are generally recognized by those in the business of selling security:

University is supposed to be welcoming. You don't want it to be the Bastille, and I am firmly against the Bastille concept, as I call it. We don't want anywhere, other perhaps than prisons and high security environments, to be really like that. What we want, if you like, is to balance the whole concept of security against operational effectiveness. Now A & E [Accident and Emergency] departments are a classic example. Because huge amounts of violence takes place against staff and others in accident and emergency departments in hospitals. But how can you not welcome people in an A & E department?

(*Security consultant*)

This problem was echoed by a security seller, much of whose work involved protecting 'headquarters buildings for major corporations'. She recognized that 'they don't want to feel as if they are living in Fort Knox, which one can perfectly well understand. So you have to strike a balance' (*Manager, security company 3*). References to the Bastille and Fort Knox in these extracts are noteworthy. It reminds us of the cultural link between private security and social failure. But it also suggests that sellers and purchasers are attuned to the communicative capacities of security – to the fact that it sends signals about the kind of environment one is in and projects an image (whether positive or negative) of the organization that owns or controls that environment. Having bemoaned his institution's 'visually horrible' CCTV cameras, one university

security manager we interviewed spoke of the importance of striking ‘a balance between not making people feel like they live in a dangerous place that needs to be like Colditz, and making sure that they are relatively safe’.

These wider organizational priorities and sensitivities matter because they serve as a restraint on the level and kind of security that institutional customers are willing to purchase. Sometimes they render certain products out of court entirely. We came across numerous examples of these restraints. The security manager of a major supermarket described his chief executive’s objection to a particular piece of security hardware: ‘Radford gates, the ones that allow you to go in but you need to be let out. The chief executive doesn’t like them very much and will have them ripped out. He thinks that they make it look like you are penned in the store.’ A security manager in the National Health Service noted her objection to having security guards on wards: ‘We are supposed to be a caring organization and I for one wouldn’t be terribly happy if I was in hospital and there were people in bullet proof vests, as they all wear, and uniforms walking around. So a security presence at reception yes, but not walking onto wards. I do not agree with that.’ A headteacher we interviewed spoke in cognate terms of doing security in ways which made his school *feel* like a school: ‘We do our best to provide the kind of security we can afford without putting fences up everywhere and having huge gates and searching people as they come in.’ A security manager at a major shopping centre voiced similar concerns in response to the question of whether, post-9/11, they had considered introducing bag checks on customers entering the mall. In so doing, he summed up the constraints that an organization’s overarching purpose – in this case consumption – can place on the kinds of security purchases organizations are willing or able to make:

We’re a community-based place which people want to come and enjoy, and if you start going down the road of creating an environment that’s almost military or airport-style checking, you take that away. You take the entertainment aspect away from people. I think people want to come here and shop because they enjoy it. It’s about fun, it’s about meeting people, it’s about having coffee and chatting with friends, and you know, finding the bargain of the day. It’s not about the military aspect, and the situation would have to be quite extreme for us to change that. I don’t think people would want to come here if it was like that.

Feeling at home with security

The tensions that characterize organizational spending on security are echoed when it comes to domestic security consumption. Our interviewees overwhelmingly accepted that some investment was required to secure their home and personal property. As a retired member of one of our focus group discussions put it: ‘I think it’s our responsibility to protect ourselves as far as possible; we should be doing as much as we can for ourselves’ (*Member, focus group 1*). This sense of responsibility translates into spending on what has become a taken-for-granted repertoire of security goods. This includes locks to doors

and windows, and installing external lights and burglar alarms. It can also include putting other objects – hedges, plants pots, gravel – to protective uses, and purchasing goods for reasons that are in part security related – notably, among our respondents, dogs. Yet these protective commodities are for the most part purchased begrudgingly and with little enthusiasm. Buying locks, gates, burglar alarms and the like is seen as a necessary, unglamorous activity; something that (hopefully) provides comfort and peace of mind, or meets the requirements of insurers, but which seldom brings any direct pleasure or satisfaction. As with organizations, a primary goal for individuals is to minimize the costs associated with security consumption: ‘I’m certainly a full believer in alarms, outside lights, whatever you can do without spending a ridiculous amount of money or going fanatical over it’ (*Member, focus group 2*).

But home security is not only a matter of money. Decisions about what falls within the repertoire of accepted – and socially acceptable – protective measures are also shaped by the challenge of ensuring that in securing one’s house one does not make it less of a *home*: people have to feel ‘at home’ with security. This requirement helps explain why certain domestic security products have failed to catch on, despite being relatively cheap, widely available and offering the promise of greater protection. We have argued elsewhere that domestic closed circuit television (CCTV) is a good case in point (Goold *et al.*, 2013: 991–992). Our research found that the ‘comfort’ that camera surveillance offers in public space is simply not transferable to the domestic realm. Quite the reverse in fact:

I don’t see the need. People that come into my house are my friends or my wife’s friends or my children’s friends, so no ... I think that’s ... if people come into my house and they see CCTV cameras they wouldn’t, they wouldn’t feel comfortable, of that I’m sure, and I think they would find it rather intrusive to say the least. I think if you need to have CCTV cameras in your house ... I think that is pretty worrying to be honest. Quite frankly, when friends of mine come to my house I want them to treat it as, as much as possible, as their own and not, not to think, ‘Oh that thing’s looking at me’. (*Male interviewee 3*)

The anxiety about domestic CCTV is generated by the fact that it represents a form of ‘aesthetic pollution’ (Woodward, 2006: 273) that prevents one’s home being understood and enjoyed as such. This extension beyond the normal repertoire of home protection also provokes concern because of ‘what it may say’ about the person who purchases it – that they are paranoid, obsessed with security, perhaps even voyeuristic. We found that similar concerns attach to another mode of domestic security that clearly tests the limits of consumer comfort: the gated housing development. There are societies – the USA, South Africa and Brazil for example – where gated communities have become commonplace in recent decades – whether for reasons of protection from crime or ‘lifestyle’ (Blakeley and Snyder, 1997; Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2003). Such developments often loom large in the sociological literature on commodified security. Gated enclaves have, however, developed much more slowly in the

UK – so much so that one can plausibly argue that, in the English case at least, they are a failed security good (Goold *et al.*, 2010).⁵

Part of the explanation for this ‘failure’ is to be found in a policy regime which requires new private housing developments to include a significant percentage of ‘affordable’ housing – a stipulation that reduces the appeal of gated enclaves by, in effect, bringing within the walls those who are meant to be kept out by them. To this one might add the moral and social distaste found among the planning profession – what one of our respondents called a ‘strong culture’ which treats gated communities as ‘an inappropriate form of housing’ (*local authority planner officer*). As another planner we interviewed put it: ‘In this country, planners have a communal mind set which is against the idea of gated communities because they are seen as being divisive and exclusionary’ (*representative, planners association*). One result is that planning objections – together with those that are typically made by highways departments – restrict the number of gated developments that might otherwise be built. A senior figure in one major house builder we interviewed described the situation thus:

You can’t build them without planning consent and it’s often refused by local authorities who think you’re providing an exclusive and undesirable community. We would probably do it in about 80–90 per cent of cases. As it happens we can only do it probably in about 40–50 per cent, mostly for planning reasons.

Yet the failure of gated developments cannot solely be explained in terms of these restraints on supply. As one planner we interviewed put it: ‘There’s not at present a significant market demand for gated communities among the middle classes.’ This sentiment was widely echoed among our interviewees (none of whom currently lived in gated housing, though some had relatives who did). Some of our respondents could see attractions in this housing form expressed in terms of greater privacy, extra feelings of security, or exercising control over one’s immediate environment. These factors could make the occupants of gated developments ‘feel a little bit special’, as the house builder we interviewed put it. However, these positive associations are not strong enough to generate much active demand for gated living. They also pale when set against the anxieties and antipathy that we found this housing form to provoke. This negative evaluation is made possible in part by the fact that the kind of social sorting delivered by gated enclaves is already produced by the operation of the housing market. It is also clear that our respondents experience levels of crime risk that can generally be managed by and within the existing repertoire of home protection. This extract from one of our focus groups with senior citizens encapsulates the dominant reaction to the idea of gated living:

I think one of the values of where we live in Britain, where we live in a village like this in Britain, is the social mix. You certainly ain’t gonna get social mix in a closed community. And would it take off if more are built? Well more will only be built if there’s a need, if there’s a perceived need for them. And that need would have to be demonstrated by a radical breakdown in social order that one hopes won’t happen, and one doesn’t expect to happen in a very short term. I’ve seen these kinds

of things abroad. I've seen them in São Paulo. But São Paulo is a pretty hairy place. Who wants to live in that kind of community?

Two connected aspects of this account show why gated developments are considered to be a step too far in pursuit of personal security. This first is that gated living clashes with certain received and cherished notions of community, with the social and aesthetic values that people associated with middle-class English neighbourhoods. As the above respondent put it: 'I think as I say, the richness of the culture in any place in Britain is the mixture of people that live in it' (*member, focus group 3*). From this starting point, respondents expressed 'sadness' (a common emotional refrain when we discussed this topic) about how people living in gated enclaves were 'caged in' (*member, focus group 1*) or 'cut off from the rest of society' (*member, focus group 1*). As one female interviewee opined: 'I feel we should be one community, not a number of separate communities. I think it is rather sad if people shut themselves away in these tight compact little areas, with their own security very often. They probably have little day to day contact with people outside'. Another worried that 'If you start segregating yourself off into little closed communities I think that's a bit of a slippery slope. One of the reasons why I like this town is that you don't tend to get the segregated areas that you do perhaps in larger towns and cities' (*female interviewee 4*). In short, gated communities are unsettling because they rub up against a certain vision of England, and clash with some alluring sensibilities regarding what that society is supposed to be like. This is evident in the following exchange between two female interviewees:

Emma: Can you imagine driving round our cities and finding, well this group of people behind a gate, next...

Anne: Would be horrible actually.

Emma: Then there's another group of people behind a gate, all over the city. It'd be appalling I think. We'd no longer be a nation.

(*Focus group 3*)

The second theme associates gated communities with social failure. This sense of failure is often registered by reference to places where order has broken down to the extent that gated communities are needed for what one respondent called 'pure security': 'In some places, South Africa, terribly dangerous country, I can see that it offers people security and a feeling of safety. But I'd hate to see that number of gated communities in this country' (*member, focus group 2*). In the milder crime conditions that obtain in England, the symbolic connection of gated communities to social fragmentation and breakdown renders them *doubly other* within prevailing middle-class sensibilities. First, they are dismissed as 'not for the likes of us', a housing form that in the British context is socially confined to, and only acceptable among, those such as 'Mr. Abramovich', 'Margaret Thatcher', 'Wayne Rooney', Robbie Williams' and 'Pinochet'.⁶ Secondly, they are marked as foreign and placed on a mental map that includes only places considered to be violent trouble-spots:

‘Johannesburg’, ‘São Paulo’, ‘Los Angeles’, and ‘Florida’.⁷ In the English context, these cultural values stand as a powerful obstacle to the growth of gated housing developments.

Conclusion: Towards a moral economy of security

The cultural sociology of markets can, in principle, be brought to bear on the study of any market. It is, however, noteworthy that its exponents have been especially drawn to the analysis of what Radin (1996) calls ‘contested commodities’. This term denotes those goods that have been subject to a long and often continuing struggle over the place and limits of market exchange in their production and distribution, where what is perceived to be at stake is a clash between ‘market’ and ‘non-market’ values. Examples include: life insurance (Zelizer, 1979; Lehtonen and Liukko, 2011); blood transfusion (Healy, 2006); sperm and egg donation (Almeling, 2011), and surrogate motherhood (Zelizer, 1985). The focus of these studies has, broadly speaking, been on ‘the particular kinds of cultural work involved in organizing markets that deal in sacred products’ (Zelizer, 2011: 17). Now, of course, not all aspects of security are ‘sacred’ in a manner that bears comparison to the above examples of goods whose commodification is routinely fought over. But security is nonetheless a practice associated – on occasions *intimately* associated – with bodily integrity and vulnerability, with the ‘sanctity’ of home and other private spaces, and with the condition of the local and national environments within which people pursue their individual and collective projects. It is also a practice – in Western societies at least – where market transactions occur to a greater or lesser extent in the shadow of a powerful and culturally resonant non-market provider – namely, the police. The analogies are at any rate close enough to warrant the claim that security is – and is likely to remain – among the goods whose commodification is troubling and contested.

The research reported in this paper has offered further evidence of this very point. We have shown that individuals and organizations bring a range of cultural resources to bear on the question of how – and whether – to purchase security goods and services. They typically treat the buying of security – not as the acquisition of a positional good, or the marker of their status, identity or group membership – but as a tediously necessary investment in the conditions that enable their individual or organizational projects to ‘go on’. Such investments in security typically jostle with, and are shaped and constrained by, other organizational priorities and objectives. People’s desire to be and feel secure is also structured by a range of beliefs about how they wish to live and the society they wish to live in – ‘meta-preferences’ (Hirschman, 1982) towards the social world that, in the English case at least, mitigate significantly against the appeal of protecting oneself within gated enclosures of all kinds, from supermarkets to hospitals to homes.

Our research was deliberately located in a specific setting – England – and is to some extent about the ways in which security exchange is entangled with the moral conflicts and self-understandings of English society and culture. The social analysis of private security would undoubtedly benefit from comparative enquiries into the *situated* meanings of security commodities across different local and national contexts. Enquiries of this kind have not thus far informed the theoretical debate on the commodification of security. That debate would also benefit from a differentiated analysis of the meanings of *particular* security goods (see, further, Thumala *et al.*, 2015). These limitations notwithstanding, the present study indicates that, in the English context, security tends not to be understood or experienced in terms of goods and services which one consumes conspicuously and for aspirational purposes. Our research calls into question, or at least qualifies, the notion that security today has a logic which necessarily trumps, or colonizes, other social purposes and values, as well as casting doubt upon overly sweeping variants of the claim that ‘the quest for security organizes modern life’ (Monahan, 2010: 81). It offers a detailed case in point of the idea that economic exchange is ‘embedded in larger social contexts, in criteria foreign to the market, which codetermine actions just as much as does economic logic’ (Stehr and Adolf, 2010: 223). We have, in sum, shown that the purchase of security – people’s willingness to enter and use markets as a means of protecting their person, property and interests – is conditioned and restrained by non-security commitments and non-market values. The economy of security is a *moral* economy and needs to be understood as such.

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Notes

- 1 The project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust whose support we gratefully acknowledge.
- 2 Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 imposes on a responsible authority a duty ‘to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area’.
- 3 This intangibility also helps to explain the informal ‘word-of-mouth’ way in which protective goods and services are typically consumed. It has been found elsewhere that purchasers rely on informal networks for recommendations in relation to goods whose performance is difficult for them to assess (DiMaggio and Louch, 1998).
- 4 This position as intermediaries between the security industry and the firms that employ them makes security managers an obvious target for those selling protective services and hardware. Several of the security firms we interviewed claimed it was much easier to sell to companies that employed dedicated security managers. Chief among the reasons for this is the perception that security managers tend to be former police officers who can be relied upon to share the sellers’ view of the value of security.

- 5 See Blandy (2006) for an analysis of what is known about the scale of gated communities in the UK and a typology of different forms of walled development. This significantly slower rate of growth has not prevented a dystopian disposition towards security from being brought to bear on the British case (see, for example, Atkinson and Blandy, 2007; Minton, 2009).
- 6 All names mentioned by our respondents in reference to gated communities.
- 7 All places mentioned by our respondents in reference to gated communities.

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