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The Moral Economy of Security

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Abstract

In this paper we draw upon our recent research into security consumption to answer two questions: First, under what conditions do people experience the buying and selling of security goods and services as morally troubling? Second, what are the theoretical implications of understanding private security as, in certain respects, tainted trade? We begin by drawing on two bodies of work on morality and markets (one found in political theory, the other in cultural sociology) in order to develop what we call a moral economy of security. We then use this theoretical resource to conduct an anatomy of the modes of ambivalence and unease that the trade in security generates. Three categories organize the analysis: blocked exchange, corrosive exchange, and intangible exchange. In conclusion, we briefly spell out the wider significance of our claim that the buying and selling of security is a morally charged and contested practice of governance.

Keywords

Commodification, economy, markets, morality, security

Introduction

The analysis of private security commonly rests on the assumption that the trade in protective goods and services can and should be understood using the standard economic view of markets. On this view, markets for security commodities are a space of free and voluntary exchange that allocates goods and services efficiently. Markets enable individuals and organizations to determine their own security preferences and to seek the protective cover they desire from customer-sensitive suppliers using the resources at their disposal. Since the market is a realm in which ‘moral criteria are irrelevant’ (Crouch, 2011: 25), individuals are free to choose the level and kinds of security they deem necessary without having to account for their preferences or decisions. As Michael Sandel (2012: 14) puts it: ‘Markets don’t wag fingers’. This view of markets is typically accompanied by a particular

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conception of the aims and limits of regulation. If one accepts these standard economic assumptions, and applies them to the security industry, then the task of regulation becomes to foster competition while preventing public harms. This is generally what current regimes of security regulation try to accomplish: by licensing individuals (to bar those with criminal records and ensure minimum levels of training) and accrediting companies with a view to raising industry standards (Button, 2007; White, 2013). Such regimes depict the market for protection as a realm of efficient, amoral exchange and assume that there is no good reason to consider the buying and selling of security troubling. In fact, they shield the operation of the security industry from 'normative assessment' and bracket off questions to do with whether and how markets *for* security might clash with certain non-market values *of* security (cf. Harcourt, 2009: 31). As Anderson (1990: 183) reminds us, in markets:

Commodities are exchanged without regard for the reasons people have in wanting them. . . Since it [the market] provides no means for discriminating among the reasons people have for wanting or providing things, it cannot function as a forum for the expression of principles about the things traded on it.

We have been prompted to re-consider this economic conception of security by an investigation we conducted into the consumption of security goods and services, the fieldwork for which took place in England between 2007 and 2009 (Goold et al., 2010). This was not a study of the security industry *per se*, but rather of the anxieties, hopes, seductions and repulsions that surround the trade in protective goods. We have not been concerned with whether guards, cameras, alarms and the like are effective in reducing crime but with the social meanings of such goods: that is, with the place they occupy in the mentalities and sensibilities of those who buy or sell security, or who are implicated in its exchange. The findings of this research have been reported elsewhere (Goold et al., 2013; Loader et al., 2014; Thumala et al., 2011, 2014). Their overarching theme has concerned the ways in which moral values and beliefs shape and constrain the kinds of security purchases individuals and organizations are willing to make, and how they think and feel about the sale of various protective products. There is little doubt that there exists a vibrant, diverse and global trade in security goods and services (van Steden, 2007; Brodeur, 2010: ch. 7; Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011). But we have found that this trade is typically accompanied by forms of unease and ambivalence among buyers and sellers – moral evaluations that stand in need of deeper reflection than they have received in the private security literature to date. This finding prompts two questions in particular that would, in our view, benefit from some careful scrutiny. First, in what respects and under what conditions do people experience the buying and selling of security goods and services as morally troubling? Second, what are the theoretical implications of understanding private security as, in certain respects, tainted trade? Our purpose in this paper is to address these questions.

We begin our enquiry by examining the claims made in two bodies of literature on markets. The first is drawn from political theory and is concerned with the moral limits of markets (e.g., Walzer, 1983; Satz, 2010; Sandel, 2012). The focus of this literature, crudely put, is on what markets do to values. Here the claim is that the market exchange of certain goods distorts or destroys their meaning/value, or else produces a market that is disfigured by inequality and generative of unfair or socially damaging outcomes. On this view, there are some goods – of which aspects of security may be one - that simply should not be for sale. The second body of work comes from cultural and economic sociology. This conceives of markets as sites for the generation, affirmation and transmission of meaning and aims to explore the moral distinctions and ‘economies of worth’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) that shape how markets operate (e.g., Zelizer, 2011; Wherry, 2012). The question in this literature is what values do to markets. The claim is that supposedly ‘economic’ behaviour – including the choice of whether or not to purchase security commodities of various kinds - is shot through with, and structured by, the social commitments and beliefs of market actors.

These two modes of enquiry are, on the surface, strange bedfellows – one is normative, the other sociological; one is concerned with the moral limits *of* markets, the other with the impact of morality *on* markets. Our argument, however, is that they can fruitfully be combined into a *moral economy of security* in ways that illuminate our subject matter. Equipped with these resources, we recapitulate some of the key themes of our research. In particular, we present an anatomy of the modes of ambivalence and unease that the trade in security generates and tease out their implications for our theoretical understanding of security. Three categories organize the analysis: blocked exchange, corrosive exchange, and intangible exchange. In conclusion, we briefly spell out the wider significance of our claim that the buying and selling of security is a morally charged and contested practice of governance.

Markets, morals and security

According to Michael Sandel, markets have come to govern our lives. ‘We live’, he writes, ‘at a time when almost anything can be bought and sold’ (Sandel 2012: 5). In his view this has not been the product of deliberate political choice. Rather, it is the consequence, at least in part, of a vacuous public discourse which has devalued moral evaluation and ‘banished’ arguments about ‘the good life’ (ibid.: 13). The result is that ‘markets have become detached from morals’ (ibid.: 6) and encroached into areas of personal, social and political life where they do not belong. Sandel’s book - *What Money Can’t Buy* - teems with examples of such incursions, several of which are to do with policing and criminal justice. Sandel makes passing reference to for-profit prisons, the outsourcing of war to private military contractors, and private guards outnumbering public police to illustrate his general point. He also cites the case of Santa Ana and other Californian cities where prisoners can

pay to up-grade to better, quieter cells away from non-paying inmates (ibid.: 3) and the practice of allowing commercial logos to be blazoned on police cars (ibid.: 193-5).

Sandel believes there are two reasons to care about market overreach. One has to do with fairness, the other with what he calls corruption. The concern about fairness is in fact twofold. We should worry about – or limit – the sale of certain goods, Sandel thinks, because under background conditions of deep inequality it is likely that individuals will be unfairly coerced into market exchange, rather than freely consenting to it. If there was a legal market for kidneys, for example, the poor would be driven by the necessity of their poverty into exchanging one of their organs for desperately needed cash. But Sandel – echoing concerns set out three decades ago by Walzer (1983: ch. 4) – is also troubled by the inflated power and reach of money (and the social and political effects of having little of it) in a society in which more and more goods are up for sale. He writes:

If the only advantage of affluence were the ability to buy yachts, sports cars and fancy vacations, inequalities of income and wealth would not matter very much. But as money comes to buy more and more – political influence, good medical care, a home in a safe neighbourhood rather than a crime-ridden one, access to elite schools rather than failing ones – the distribution of income and wealth looms larger and larger. Where all good things are bought and sold, having money makes all the difference in the world.

(Sandel , 2012: 8)

Sandel's second worry is about corruption. He takes issue with the standard economic assumption that putting a good up for sale has no impact upon the value or properties of that good. In Sandel's view, markets 'don't only allocate goods; they also express and promote certain attitudes towards the good being expressed' (ibid.: 9; see also Anderson, 1990). This means that market exchange can destroy or diminish the meaning or value of a good. A clear instance of the former is friendship. Any attempt to purchase friendship necessarily dissolves the thing that is being bought: it 'turns it into something else' (ibid.: 94). But even in respect of goods that are not destroyed by the act of purchase (a commodified kidney is no less of a kidney than a donated one), market exchange can still corrode their value. Sandel uses the example of purchased 'wedding toasts' to illustrate this point. A purchased toast remains a toast but the wedding guests will tend to think less of that toast if they discover it has been written by a third party in return for payment. But there are other more serious examples to consider. A market for blood turns blood into a commodity in ways that erode people's sense of obligation to donate (Titmuss, 1971). Giving privileged access to places in elite universities to the offspring or alumni or donors undermines the meritocratic and honourific meaning of that good. One reason we do not allow people to charge to perform other people's jury service for them is because it would corrupt the idea of jury service as a civic duty. Putting corporate logos on police cars sends an altered signal about the value(s) of public policing. In all these cases the good is diminished, or tainted, by being put up for sale: their market exchange 'crowds out non-

market norms' (Sandel, 2012: 78).² We return below – in the case of security – to the corrosive effects of market exchange.

Sandel's work bears a family resemblance to that of an earlier protagonist in the debate about the moral limits of markets - Michael Walzer (1983). This question has also recently been given extended philosophical scrutiny by Deborah Satz (2012). Walzer's argument in *Spheres of Justice* is that different goods – membership, honour, love, education, political office, welfare, security – have particular social meanings. He accepts that these meanings change over time and place and are contested in any particular time and place. But Walzer nonetheless thinks it is possible to reconstruct the most plausible shared meaning of say, political office, or education, or security, in a given society and, crucially, to distribute these goods using criteria and procedures derived from that meaning. Distributive justice, in Walzer's view, is an 'art of differentiation' (1983: xv): it has to do with respecting and protecting the criteria appropriate to each 'sphere' of goods. Against this backdrop, Walzer thinks we should worry about money because it abuts every other sphere and has a strong propensity to invade these spheres and override their local distributive criteria. When it does this, Walzer argues, money becomes a means of domination, the creator of what he calls 'market tyranny'. Justice therefore requires that we 'fix' money's 'boundaries' (Walzer, 1983: 100) and block certain exchanges in ways that 'set limits on the dominance of wealth' (ibid.). Walzer includes criminal justice, exemption from jury service and 'basic police protection' among his list of 'blocked exchanges' (ibid.: 100-102) – a point we develop below. His overall claim is that with the right blocks in place money (and markets) can extend and enhance individual choice. The key task is to prevent 'the harms experienced in the realm of money' from cascading outwards in ways that do damage 'to life' and 'to social standing' (ibid.: 107). This means there are compelling reasons for wanting to limit the power of money over goods that are vital to, even constitutive of, social membership – of which security is demonstrably one (Loader and Walker, 2007: ch. 6). Of such goods Walzer writes:

Needed goods are not commodities. Or, more precisely, they can be bought and sold only insofar as they are available above and beyond whatever level of provision is fixed by democratic decision-making (and only insofar as the buying and selling doesn't distort distribution below that level).

(Walzer, 1983: 90)

² There are, conversely, goods whose social value is enhanced, even constituted, by their market exchange. Funerals are a good case in point. Doing the 'right thing' by the deceased often involves being willing to pay to give loved ones a 'good send off' rather than, say, engaging in a do-it-yourself arrangement or relying on a state funeral service. This funeral market is nonetheless constrained by moral values: the fact that one is buying, among other things, solemnity and dignity places limits on the marketing/branding of funeral products and competition between providers.

Sandel and Walzer provide good reasons to think about the *meaning* of different security goods and about the implications of these meanings for their (market and non-market) distribution. The investigation of such meanings has been one of the aims of the research we reflect upon in this paper. A contrasting approach to the moral limits of markets is developed by Deborah Satz. Satz focuses on the *consequences* of particular markets and the underlying conditions of market agents – what she calls the *source* of markets. Her overarching purpose is to theorize the basic parameters of ‘noxious markets’, by which Satz means markets whose operation ‘undermine(s) the conditions that people need if they are to relate as equals’ (ibid.: 94). Satz argues that there are four basic characteristics of noxious markets – two pertaining to consequences, the other two to source. Markets are noxious if they: i) produce extremely harmful outcomes for participants or third parties; ii) are extremely harmful for society in that they undermine the ‘social framework needed for people to interact as equals’ (ibid.: 95); iii) are marked by ‘very weak or highly asymmetric knowledge or agency’ among market actors; and iv) reflect the ‘extreme vulnerabilities’ of one of the transacting parties (recall Sandel’s worry about the poor being coerced into a legal market for kidneys).

Using these criteria, Satz eschews a meaning-based approach to understanding markets and their moral limits (ibid., 81). Her analysis is nonetheless premised on a keen awareness of the signifying properties of markets. She argues that markets not only allocate resources and distribute income but ‘particular markets also shape our politics and culture, even our identities’ (ibid.: 4). The evaluation of markets must therefore attend ‘not only to the production and distribution of goods’ but also to ‘the social and political relationships that various markets sustain and support’ (ibid.: 11). In this respect, Satz’s approach has more in common with that of Sandel and Walzer than it appears at first blush. All three authors supply theoretical desiderata which need to be kept firmly in mind when we consider the ways in which market exchange of protective goods may ‘undermine the conditions for citizens to interact as equals’ (ibid.: 101), and whether it is appropriate to ‘block’ or in some other way restrain the buying and selling of such goods.

Recent research in cultural and economic sociology adopts a different approach to the study of markets and their relation to non-market phenomena than that found within political theory (e.g., Spillman, 1999; Almeling, 2011; Zelizer, 2011; Wherry, 2012). In her work on markets and culture, Viviana Zelizer has developed an alternative to what she argues are two prevalent positions on the relationship of economic to non-economic phenomena (Zelizer, 2005: 20-32; 2011: 386-87). The first of these she calls the ‘separate spheres’/‘hostile worlds’ approach. On this view, the social world is divided into a realm of rational economic calculation and separate arenas of sentiment and solidarity, and contact between these two worlds produces mutual contamination and disaster. A second perspective – which Zelizer terms the ‘nothing-but’ approach – reduces market activity to a single axis which is taken to define it. So markets are either nothing-but economic

rationality (the view which is generally axiomatic in economics), or nothing-but culture, or power, or politics (the view which tends to predominate in sociology). This division of the world into sharply conflicting 'market' and 'non-market' spheres tends, according to Zelizer (2011: 368), to generate the fear that a 'boundless market' will colonize and then undermine social or personal relations that were formerly free of the 'taint' of monetary exchange – precisely the kind of fear that animates the work of Walzer and Sandel.

Zelizer proposes an alternative to the 'moral gloom and social vulnerability' (2011: 369) which she associates with this position. 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' (ibid: 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), the ways in which values can shape or create markets (Callon, et al. 2007), and the kinds of boundary work that individuals practice when evaluating the connections between economic and non-economic social practices – in the present case, in respect of deciding whether and how to spend money in order to protect one's person and property.

This approach can 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 we reflect upon in his paper provides further evidence of this very point. It demonstrates that individuals and organizations bring a range of cultural resources to bear on the question of how – and whether – to trade security goods and services in ways that are often generative of moral unease and ambivalence. In the remainder of the paper, we present an anatomy of the differing dimensions of this ambivalent exchange and reflect on their theoretical implications. It is for this purpose that we think one can fruitfully combine the two – contrasting, even conflicting – approaches described in this section, albeit aware that this coming together must respect salient theoretical differences and avoid any kind of false ‘synthesis’. Borrowing from Andrew Sayer, we term the approach we are seeking to craft *a moral economy of security*. According to Sayer (2005: 78), “‘moral economy’ is the study of how economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms, and how in turn those norms may be compromised, overridden or reinforced by economic pressures.’ It is, Sayer continues, ‘a kind of inquiry’ which encompasses ‘positive’ and ‘normative’ dimensions. In the present case, such enquiry seeks to combine detailed interpretive scrutiny of the effects of moral sentiments on the trade in security commodities (a sociology of moral judgement, if you like), with normative evaluation of how such exchange should be shaped by non-market values associated with the good of security.

Buying and selling security: The anatomy of ambivalent exchange

We now want to recapitulate and reflect upon the core themes to have emerged from our research. The detailed findings of the study have been reported elsewhere and we do not repeat them here (Goold et al., 2013; Loader et al., 2014; Thumala et al., 2011, 2014). Instead, we conduct an anatomy of the moral dispositions towards the trade in security services and technologies that have emerged from our enquiry. The anatomy is organized around a set of categories that enable us to tease out the kinds and degrees of ambivalence that accompany the market exchange of differing protective products in particular, and the commodification of security in general. Our purpose is to think about commodified security as a site of moral conflicts and to pay close attention to the grammar of unease (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) that attends the buying and selling of protective goods. We seek to understand the values that are perceived to be at stake, or at risk of being compromised or crushed, by the trade in security, and to examine what lay moralities tell us about the good of security and the scope and governance of its market distribution.³ Three

³ In undertaking such analysis, it is important to identify what if anything is distinctive about security, or certain aspects of security, that prompts people to feel uneasy about its market exchange. One also needs to be alive

categories are used to organize the analysis: blocked exchange, corrosive exchange, and intangible exchange.

Blocked exchange

Several decades ago, James Tobin noted that a good economics graduate student ‘could write a short examination paper proving that voluntary transactions in votes would increase the welfare of the sellers as well as the buyers’ (Tobin, 1970: 269). The seller, knowing that her individual vote is unlikely to affect the outcome of any election, benefits from exchanging her vote for whatever cash value it can obtain in the market. The buyer uses her income to increase her perceived influence in an election by purchasing a vote that someone else prefers not to use. Yet no democratic society permits a legal trade in votes. This is in part, to return to Sandel, because extant inequalities would place the poorest under undue pressure to sell their vote, thereby disenfranchising themselves. It would also give those with the most income the ability to buy disproportionate influence over the outcome of an election. A market for votes introduces criteria that are external to, and destructive of, those appropriate to the shared meaning of political office in a democracy. Votes are one means by which ‘citizens participate with others on an equal footing in deciding on the laws and policies that will govern them’ (Satz, 2010: 102). The meaning of voting is constituted by its place within a system of collective self-rule – the outcome, in fact, of an historical struggle to disconnect the franchise from property-ownership and monetary wealth. The vote is, in a democracy, a political right, not personal property to be put up for sale. The market exchange of votes is therefore, in Walzer’s terms, ‘blocked’. ‘The legitimacy of the political process depends on the prohibition of such transactions’ (Satz 2010: 34).

Notwithstanding, Zelizer’s aforementioned critique of a ‘hostile worlds’ approach to the relation of market to non-market phenomena, it remains the case that across modern societies there are certain exchanges which *are* blocked, as the case of voting illustrates. It is also striking that many instances of such ‘blocked exchange’ are to be found in the realm of policing and criminal justice. One cannot, for example, establish or employ a private policing firm to arrest and detain criminal suspects, even if such firms were able to perform the task more effectively or efficiently than the public police. One cannot pay to jump the queue for a police response to a reported incident. One cannot buy your way out of a criminal charge, or pay someone else to serve a punishment for you.⁴ In most states of the US, and across all other democracies, a prisoner cannot pay to ‘up-grade’ to a better cell. As mentioned, it is not possible to recruit someone else to perform jury service on one’s behalf.

to the comparisons that can fruitfully be made with other goods whose commodification is morally troubling and routinely contested.

⁴ Except, of course, for the odd and anomalous exception of the fine (O’Malley, 2009). But even here there are limits: one cannot insure against fines.

Why are these exchanges blocked? What properties do these examples share in common? In part, what is going on here is the prevention of individuals from using their financial power to infringe or undermine the active rights and entitlements of others (as in the case of the arrest and detention company). This block places limits on the use of legitimate violence by private interests – on the clear understanding that such violence needs to be placed under vigilant public scrutiny and control. In other cases, individuals are precluded from using money to evade, and thereby destroy, civic obligations such as jury service; to buy one's way out of duties imposed by law in response to criminal wrong-doing (paying to avoid a criminal charge), or to pay for privileged treatment from legal authorities (jumping the queue for police response, 'up-grading' prisons cells). Above all, these examples indicate a determination to stop money from undermining the guarantee of equality that is foundationally associated with the good of security in liberal democratic polities – a guarantee of equal subjection *to* law and equal protection *by* law. Once this presumption of equal treatment is made, the market becomes inappropriate as a mechanism for distributing basic protective resources and criminal justice disposals. Allowing money to reign in this sphere would be to subvert and destroy the democratic promise of security.

The cases just discussed seem obvious and uncontentious. Who seriously thinks or claims that people should be able to pay to jump the queue for police response? This, however, is part of the point. Their sheer 'obviousness' means that cases such as this did not surface in our discussions with sellers or (potential) buyers about the trade in security services and products. This suggests that there are elements of the policing and security landscape that are so embedded in English social consciousness as public functions that they are simply not problematized, or considered worth talking about, when the subject of security purchasing is raised for discussion. These examples, and others like them, are cloaked in silence, falling into the quiet world of the taken for granted. As such, they provided the background frame for our investigation into the commodification of security, rather than being the focus of active concern, discourse or reflection.

None of this warrants the claim that the content of blocked security exchanges is invariant across time and place. A cursory knowledge of the pre-history and formation of the public police in western societies, and of subsequent relations between state policing and the private security industry, attests to historical variation in the scope of markets in crime control (Zedner, 2006). The fact that buying a gun as a means of self-protection is blocked in the UK, but treated as a constitutional right of free citizens in the US (Carlson, 2012), is powerful testament to cultural differences in the reach and legitimacy of markets for protection. Such cases provide good reasons for situating social enquiry into the kinds of security exchange that are blocked in ways that pay close regard to local meanings and national differences. This is what our study attempted in the English case. In that, or any other, national context one has also to remain alive to how previously accepted limits on market transactions in the realms of security and justice can come to be challenged, fought

over, and partially or wholly removed – with the effect that the good concerned moves into our next category of permitted, but corrosive, exchange. Private prisons are a good example.⁵ So too is the decision to allow commercial sponsorship of public police forces in the UK, to which we return shortly.

Yet it remains noteworthy that the examples of blocked security exchange we have described possess a stability and durability with which one has to reckon. This stability - and the unspoken, taken-for-grantedness that typically accompanies it - alerts us to a key, even constitutive, property of security in a democratic political community. That property has to do with what we earlier called security's democratic promise – the fact that protection is guaranteed (if not often in reality delivered) on equal terms to all. Against this backdrop, investigation into the blocks that are placed on market exchange in the security sphere, and careful reflection on why these blocks are erected, is an essential ingredient in understanding how money works to shape access to protective resources, where markets do and do not belong in this domain, and how to regulate those exchanges that are legally permitted to occur. In short, the analytical value of the category of blocked exchange is this: one can learn a lot about the buying and selling of security goods when one thinks hard about (rather than quietly accepting as given) the places where markets are not permitted to encroach, and why.

Corrosive exchange

Modern democracies do not permit voluntary transactions in votes, for the reasons described above. But there are still other ways in money can shape contests for political office and affect the outcome of those contests. Individuals and organizations can donate funds to political parties. Those parties are allowed to spend money in their efforts to enlist the support of voters. So too are private organizations. In the UK, legal limits are placed on these activities. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 introduced a list of those permitted to donate to political parties and stipulates that donations of over £7,500 must be reported to the Electoral Commission. There are also limits on how much money political parties are allowed to spend, at least during election campaigns. In the USA, a more permissive legal regime operates: the US Supreme Court has even determined that limits on the amount of money that can be spent by private corporations during an election infringe the First Amendment of the US Constitution.⁶ Yet in both contexts, there is an

⁵ Security companies that run prisons or immigration detention centres are a case of private operators being authorized to detain inmates and, if necessary, administer force. So too are private military companies. In a detailed historical study, Percy (2007) has shown that the use of mercenaries in armed conflict has for centuries coincided with a widespread anti-mercenary norm. This norm holds mercenaries to be immoral because they fight for money and without appropriate cause, and operate outside of legitimate control. Percy also demonstrates how this norm has significantly shaped the activities of private military companies since their resurgence in the 1990s, steering them away from involvement in offensive armed conflict and towards military support services.

⁶ *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010)

enduring dispute about party and campaign finance – a dispute animated by the worry that money can exert an undue influence on the outcomes of elections, and hence compromise the meaning and values that democratic society's attach to political office (e.g., Dworkin, 2010; Friedman, 2013).

The category of corrosive exchange alerts us to goods the sale of which is permitted but whose market exchange is worrisome and contested because of the effects of sale on non-market values associated with such goods. The field of policing and criminal justice contains many practices that give rise to such worries about corrosion. In this section, we consider three of them. They relate, in turn, to the 'marketization' of public police forces; to the scale and reach of private security activity; and to the social effects of particular protective products. The term 'marketization' describes the process whereby public police organizations act as consumers of goods and services that were previously produced from within such organizations and/or as sellers of services that were previously provided free at the point of delivery (see Ayling et al., 2010: chs. 4 & 5). One practice introduced under this banner allows (or requires) bodies such as local authorities, housing associations, or owners of shopping malls or sports/leisure venues to 'buy' (or pay for) public police officers for specified periods of time, or to patrol designated areas or events – what has been called 'user-pays policing' (Gans, 2000; Crawford and Lister, 2006). Some senior officers have in recent years envisaged the police using their 'brand' status to make significant inroads into the market for security patrols (e.g., Blair, 2002). On one view, there is little to be concerned about with such exchanges. It can be argued that private interests who conduct activities for profit should bear part of the cost of controlling crime-related externalities generated by their activities. The 'purchased' officers remain under the control of the selling force, and not the organization that is paying for them (though this is an area of potential dispute). The price charged means that the lost officers are replaced and there is no diminution of the public resource. The police may even use this practice to generate surplus revenue that can be invested elsewhere in the organization. But this practice generates unease nonetheless. It does so because it signals that a public service – whose principle of distribution is a mix of basic membership entitlement and need – is differentially available to those who are willing and able to pay. Money, in other words, is given space to leverage an increased share of a public good. In so doing, it corrodes the value of that good.

Similar worries attend a second example, the commercial sponsorship of public police. Since 1994, police forces in the UK have been able to generate up to one per cent of their income from sponsorship. The practice is also permitted in the US and elsewhere (Grabosky, 2007; Ayling et al., 2010: 168-89). Given the relatively small proportion of total income involved, the practice has provoked relatively little interest or controversy in the UK. But there are nonetheless important values at stake in any association of the police with private interests.

One worry is that this arrangement places a part of public policing (the details of contracts with sponsors) behind the cloak of commercial confidentiality and less open to public scrutiny. Another is that the police are lending their symbolic power to corporations who pay to have their goods 'approved of' by the police. A more significant risk is that private interests may – consciously or unconsciously – receive privileged access to, or treatment from, police organizations and officers. Even if these concerns are without foundation (and one needs to remember the role of image and symbolism in police legitimacy), the practice of sponsorship nonetheless sends a signal that fits uneasily with core values of democratic policing, such as independence, impartiality and public service. When the police accept money from commercial sponsors, an important line is crossed.

A further illustration of corrosive exchange comes not from public policing being 'tainted' by the market, but more directly from the commercial provision of security. Here, the main concern about corrosion pertains to the overall scale and reach of the security industry. There is an argument which states that the trade in security operates principally as a *supplement* to basic police protection, which remains in place and upon which private security has no material or symbolic impact. On this view, private security is – in Walzer's terms – a consumer good. As a consequence, one can be relaxed about the number of guards, alarms, access control systems, surveillance cameras etc. that individuals and organizations purchase in addition to basic public protection, so long as that public protection continues to be available equally to all, funded out of general taxation. We should, in other words, no more care if someone (over) consumes protective goods than we do about another person's collection of antiques, fast cars, or yachts. 'Given the right blocks', Walzer argues, 'there is no such thing as the maladministration of consumer goods. It just doesn't matter, from the standpoint of complex equality, that you have a yacht and I don't' (1983: 107). There is no doubt something to this argument and many individual purchases of security services and equipment can be understood in precisely this way. But there are also limits to how far the analogy to 'consumer goods' can be pressed. Let us consider two of them.

The first limit concerns the routine deployment of commercially provided security actors and technologies in 'mass private property' – that is, property that is privately owned but which exists for nothing other than public use (Shearing and Stenning, 1981; Kempa et al., 2004). Shopping malls, sports stadia, leisure arenas, transport systems, and office complexes are typically listed as examples of such spaces. Here the argument about consumer goods and the impossibility of maladministration is undermined by the fact that the owners of such arenas purchase security guards, cameras and the like in order to regulate and control the users of that space (including their ability to enter it) and to generate and maintain particular forms of social and moral order within it. The wider concern this creates (and the reason why it is not so easy to bring this aspect of private security under the umbrella of 'consumer goods') is that functionally public settings are being privately ordered in ways

that may threaten or harm the values of equal access, pluralistic enjoyment, and freedom of expression that are in a liberal democracy associated with public space (von Hirsch et al., 2000; Wakefield, 2003).

A second limit arises when the scale, distribution or practices of private security are such that they contribute to what has become known as ‘the secession of elites’ (e.g., Lasch, 1996). The worry here is that (wealthy) individuals and organizations consume, and subsequently come to depend upon, market-supplied forms of protection for their homes, neighbourhoods or interests, to such an extent that they become unable to apprehend the direct value to them of public police provision. Even more problematic is where they begin to resent ‘paying twice’ – once for private security that they routinely use, and again for public provision which plays little or no part in their security imaginary or everyday protective practices. Here the trade in protection operates in ways which threaten to erode the tax base underpinning security’s democratic promise – that of equal protection for all (e.g., Sklansky, 1999; Low, 2003). What appears to be merely the supplementary ‘buying and selling’ of security services in fact operates to ‘distort distribution’ of basic police protection ‘below that level’ (Walzer, 1983: 90). Moreover, this process can be accompanied by symbolic corrosion of the idea that security is something that members of a political community place and pursue in common (however much they might disagree on the particulars of how to provide it); in some societies private security may become pervasive and embedded in ways that inhibit the cultivation of any such democratic egalitarian security norm (Caldeira, 2000). In such circumstances, it may not be going too far to describe the trade in protective services and technologies as being, or always potentially at risk of becoming, a ‘noxious market’ – one that is extremely harmful for society in so far as it undermines the ‘social framework needed for people to interact as equals’ (Satz, 2012: 95).⁷

Concerns about the corrosion of non-market values by private security do not only apply to questions of scale and distribution. Our research has found that these concerns are also attached to particular protective products. Two examples from the study illustrate this point. These examples also provide evidence of the role that values can play in actively *shaping* markets, along the lines that Zelizer (2011) and other economic sociologists suggest. The first example is personal GPS trackers (Thumala et al., 2014). Our research sought to describe and make sense of the reception of these novel protective devices, especially in respect of one of their key target consumers: parents. The marketing of GPS trackers encouraged parents to believe that this technology enabled them to offer their children the freedom to go out, while being able to monitor their whereabouts in real time. Notwithstanding parents’ worries about their children’s safety, we found little enthusiasm

⁷ The argument set out here can also be applied to the private provision of two other social goods: education and health. We do not have the space in this paper to compare the three cases save to make the claim that the good of security is constitutive of democratic political communities in ways that education and health are not (Loader and Walker, 2007: ch. 6).

for this new product, principally because of the damaging effect people felt it would have on the development of children's autonomy and the quality of familial relations. The GPS tracker was viewed as a poor technological substitute for care, a good the purchase and use of which would corrode trust between parents and their children.

Similar concerns lie behind the reticence our respondents expressed towards living in gated residential developments (Loader et al., 2014). There are of course societies – the USA and South Africa, for example - in which 'gated communities' have become commonplace. But in the English case, we found a marked reluctance to embrace this kind of protection and the way of life that it implies. To be sure, this antithetical disposition towards living behind gates is made possible by manageable levels of crime risk and the fact that the housing market generally produces the kind of social sorting that renders physical enclosure unnecessary. Yet our respondents also rejected gated communities because of their association with social failure, and because such enclaves offended against social and aesthetic values that people associate with English middle-class life. Achieving security by purchasing property in gated communities is felt, in other words, to diminish or destroy the ideals of community and neighbourliness that one wishes one's security arrangements to preserve. Trackers and gated communities are, in short, considered to have potentially corrosive effects on cherished non-market values. They are largely rejected for this reason.

Intangible exchange

Despite the blocking of certain security exchanges, and worries and refusals pertaining to the corrosive social effects of some security markets and goods, there remains a vibrant local and global trade in protective goods and services. Individuals and organizations *do* to a greater or lesser extent seek security via the purchase of commodities. Our study has, however, indicated that this purchasing is typically attended – at least in the English case – by unease and ambivalence. We found this among individuals and organizations that are invited to consume security products (Loader et al., 2014). Perhaps, more surprisingly, we also encountered it among those who sell security (Thumala et al., 2011). The actions and talk of security practitioners (both during interviews with us, and among each other in the trade press) intimate a worry that the selling of security is in various ways *tainted* trade, one that stands uncomfortably close to industries that struggle to establish trust and credibility (such as gambling or sexual services), or those that constantly strive, and routinely fail, to lay claim to the mantle of professionalism (such as alternative medicine). This fragility is further evidenced by the way in which the scandals that periodically hit security firms – such as the failure of G4S to deliver fully on its contract for the 2012 London Olympics – do not just affect the firm involved, but typically also raise questions about the very *idea* of private security drawn from a reservoir of more generic public skepticism.

We have described the details of this moral ambivalence among sellers elsewhere (Thumala et al., 2011). But let us recap its main themes. We might note, first, a set of troubles that

seem to be recurrent features of the industry's self-understanding – troubles that have become a staple finding of research on private security (White, 2010). These include concerns about the background, training and skills of industry personnel; the stubborn presence of 'cowboys' and of associations with violence; and worries about over- or mis-sold products. It is too much of a stretch to claim that this is an industry marked by self-loathing. But it is striking just how often security industry players talk about *other* players who are sully the industry's reputation and damaging its prospects for acceptability and growth. Secondly, we need to note the ongoing requirement for, and engagement in, legitimation work. Mention can be made here of the long campaign fought by large industry actors for stronger/statutory regulation (a demand that government resisted for several decades – White, 2010); the restless focus on skills and credentials, the forming and promotion of professional associations, and the material and symbolic 'borrowing' from the police – whether in the form of employing ex-officers, wearing police-like uniforms, or seeking and making prominent marketing use of police endorsements. Thirdly, one needs to note just how infrequently industry actors justify their work with reference to what Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: ch. 6) call 'the market world' (that is, by pointing to job and wealth creation, returns for investors etc.), but instead seek legitimation in different 'orders of worth'. These include the 'civic world' (in terms of control and sanction by state regulation, partnership with public police agencies, working for the general interest); the 'industrial world' (the claims of professionalism and expertise); the 'world of fame' (with its concern with questions of honour and reputation), and even the 'domestic world' (being brought within the authority of the 'extended police family'). The quest for legitimation, in other words, takes purveyors of security outside of the world, and the regime of justification, that they in fact operate within.

Further modes of ambivalence are to be found among those who buy, or who are invited to consider buying, security goods and services (Loader et al., 2014). The dominant feature of this ambivalence concerns the *grudge* nature of spending on security. Our research found plenty of evidence to suggest that individuals and organizations regard some level of security investment as essential for the realization of their projects – to protect homes, or loved ones, or business or organizational interests. But the required spending is nonetheless marked by several features that indicate its begrudged nature. It is in significant measure reactive, a response to clearly identifiable risks or actual victimization. It is often driven by the demands of insurance companies, or by legal regimes. For example, we found evidence that a market for GPS trackers to protect vulnerable workers *had* developed, largely fueled by changes to the law on corporate manslaughter (Thumala et al., 2014). Such spending tends to be highly attuned to price, and for many security goods and services people are suspicious of the idea that quality exists or is worth paying for. In respect of security patrols, the service purchased tends to lack the symbolic reassurance supplied by the public police (Rowland and Coupe, 2013). This is, moreover, a realm of consumption that is marked by next to no advertising or branding, and one in which consumers invest as little of their time,

energy or identity as possible. Security, in short, is not a realm of consumer goods in the terms that Walzer describes them. It exists largely outside the paraphernalia of modern consumer culture. Rather, it is more akin to insurance or car maintenance; a necessarily evil of modern life that individuals and organizations experience less as free and voluntary market exchange and more as a kind of tax.

It is commonly said, not least within the industry itself (Mulone, 2013), that this moral unease among sellers – and grudge orientation among buyers – is a result of the low pay, poor training, and shoddy standards that currently characterize much of the security industry. On this view, the sentiments we have described are destined to wither away as the industry professionalizes or becomes better regulated. It is our view, however, that these forms of ambivalence share in common something that runs much deeper, and is much less easily rectified. They are the product of the third category that organizes our anatomy of security markets – that of intangible exchange.

The business of buying and selling of ‘security’ is intangible in two senses. First, potential consumers of security products are confronted with an *intangibility of risk*: the problem of not knowing the likelihood and magnitude of the risks one faces and from where they might emanate. It is always possible to draw on a variety of sources – experience, local rumour, the media, crime statistics, police advice – to judge the scale of these risks and assess their likely consequences. One may even seek, or be offered, advice by a growing number of ‘security consultants’, or by those who market and sell protective products. But such ‘calculations’ can never be precise: there is no escape from a condition of deep uncertainty. In this respect, potential purchasers of security goods are in a position that bears close resemblance to anyone who considers buying insurance (Ericson et al., 2003). Both goods promise protection against worrisome unknowns.

But here the resemblance starts to fade. One buys insurance to protect against an intangible risk. But one buys a tangible product: a promise to pay monetary compensation if the risk being insured against materializes (and the conditions of the policy are not breached).⁸ In the case of security, buyers face an ongoing and inescapable *intangibility of protection*: the impossibility of knowing whether any given protective service or product can or will reduce risk of crime and related loss. Consumers of security are of course buying a tangible good – an alarm, surveillance cameras, access control system, trackers, patrol service etc. They are also arguably buying something with real and tangible benefits in the present – the transfer of risk and its management to specialist agents and technologies, and the reassurance and peace of mind that this may bring. It nonetheless remains impossible to know if the product one has bought has reduced any given risk. It may of course fail to do so – as evidenced by

⁸ The effect of such conditions should not however be underestimated: insurers can refuse to pay, fight the claim or may go bankrupt and these uncertainties may operate in ways that make insurance cover seem intangible.

subsequent victimization. But absent such victimization, it is possible that the risk was alleviated by other means, or was exaggerated, or never in fact existed at all. Moreover, and this is the key difference between security goods and insurance, sellers of protective products never promise to eradicate risk still less to compensate buyers if their product fails to prevent future loss. In this respect, security commodities begin to seem less like insurance and more akin to goods like therapy or cosmetic surgery (Sanchez Taylor, 2012). In each case, one can never be entirely sure one is buying something that one needs, or if the purchased good can produce, or has delivered, the condition for which one is striving.

This double intangibility – of risk and of protection – is deeply implicated in the meaning of security as a social good, in ways that significantly structure the market exchange of protective goods. Firstly, it helps to explain the widespread finding – of our research and that of others – that security is grudge spending. Under the conditions of intangibility we have described, security does not routinely ‘trump’ other values and competing considerations (cf. Monahan, 2010). People are careful what they spend on security for fear of spending prematurely, or too much, or needlessly. Security always also has to jostle with, and may lose out to, other commitments and spending priorities. Secondly, it generates a generic wariness towards the claims made about protective services and products by those who are in the business of selling them. Where questions of risk and protection are radically unknowable, there exists a standing possibility that dangers will be invented or inflated, that needs may be misdiagnosed, that products may needlessly be hyped or mis-sold – a possibility that no amount of regulation or professionalization can entirely eradicate. Thirdly, the intangibility of security produces a space into which non-market values enter and ‘compete’ whenever the question of the meaning and sources of security is under consideration. Its intangibility is one reason why security is destined to remain in a realm of what Radin (1996: 103) calls ‘incomplete commodification’ – a realm ‘in which things are sold but the interaction between participants in the transaction cannot be fully or perspicuously described as the sale of things’ (ibid.: 106-107). Security, in other words, is a sphere where market logics are constantly present and in certain instances dominant, but where market exchange remains worrisome, morally troubling and contested or refused.

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that markets for protective goods cannot adequately be understood using a standard model of economic exchange. Such a model is unable to accommodate the key lesson of the study we have reflected upon here. We have found that security is a contested moral space in which market and non-market values jostle and collide, and where commodities are judged by individuals at least in part in terms of their perceived effects on social values and commitments. We have found that commercial security actors and technologies order social relations in ways that have discernible (and sometimes damaging) effects upon non-market values such as trust, privacy, solidarity and

community. Our study has demonstrated that this impact is often acknowledged by both sellers and buyers of protective products. Markets however, as both Anderson (1990) and Sandel (2012) have argued, cannot function as a forum for expressing and debating moral evaluations of the things that are traded on them. Present arrangements for regulating the security industry are not much better equipped for this task. As we have seen, regulation tends to be focused on checking the backgrounds of those employed in the industry and accrediting security companies with a view to fostering competition and raising standards. Its purpose is to prevent and remedy market failure, not to track and respond to the overall social and moral significance of markets for protection.

The overarching implication of our analysis is that we should treat private security not (solely) as a matter of personal choice and consensual exchange, nor reduce it to instrumental calculation of how resources can most efficiently be deployed to ensure protection. Markets for security are (also) a form of social ordering. We need to re-conceptualize security markets not simply as places to which individuals and organizations are free to turn to satisfy their demands for protection, but as morally-charged and contested practices of governance that play potentially significant roles in determining conduct, shaping subjectivities and reproducing social relations and inequalities. This means thinking of commercial security as a form of private power whose scale, distribution and activities are necessarily implicated in, and may challenge and erode, the democratic promise of security – the idea that democratic political communities are in part constituted by the act of putting and pursuing security in common and offering basic protection equally to one and all (Loader and Walker, 2007). Conceived of in these ways, private security can legitimately be made the subject of public accountability and control.

Given this, the following questions arise: Can one bring the diffuse moral concerns about private security of the kind our research has identified into political discourse about how society is and ought to be ordered? Can one enlarge the regulatory imagination so that it ‘honors the internally plural understandings’ (Radin, 1996: 107) we have found to be associated with security? Can one create institutions with the capacity to regulate the trade in protective products not just ‘for efficiency’ (ibid.: 108) but in order to give effect to and protect the full range of social and political values upon which markets for security impinge? These are questions for another day. We believe, however, that the mapping of the moral economy of security we have undertaken in this paper has served to underscore the importance of creating fora in which ‘to deliberate openly and publicly’ about the meaning of security as a social practice (Sandel, 2012: 202) with a view to determining which security goods ‘should be bought and sold, and which should be governed by non-market values’ (ibid.: 11).

Notes

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