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The Security Industry

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There is no universally accepted definition of 'the security industry'. Scholars of private security (mostly criminologists) tend to adopt the definition which best suits their purposes. However, in pursuit of a history of the security industry, one might define it as a discrete group of firms which compete to provide products and/or services, through the market, in response to consumer demand either for protection against loss or harm (e.g. transit guarding, burglary insurance), or for other policing functions (e.g. private investigation, policing labour disputes). However, if one regards the security industry as a social (rather than simply a commercial) phenomenon, then the changing social role and status of these firms as providers of security are also central to its history.

The British security industry – in the sense of a publically recognised body of private firms providing protection against crime – emerged between the late 18th and mid 19th centuries (Churchill, 2015). At this time, the industry was composed largely of the leading lock and safe firms, which, in contrast to the long-established small lock-making workshops, exploited large-scale factory production. These firms developed the first security brand identities, and some maker's names (notably Bramah and Chubb) became closely associated with the promise of 'perfect' protection against crime. Furthermore, these companies pioneered innovation in security technologies, and thereby established a link between brand-name security and cutting-edge design.

Since the later 19th century, the security industry has progressively diversified into new products and services. In some areas, Britain took the lead, notably in burglary insurance, which was first marketed in 1889 (Moss, 2011). However, more commonly, British security enterprise followed developments forged in America, for example in the construction of purpose-built safe deposits (which first arrived in Britain in the 1870s) and in the expansion of burglar alarm production (also toward the close of the century). Above all, America led the way in the development of private policing companies, which provided diverse services including

private investigation, industrial guarding and strike breaking (Miller, 2013). By contrast, formal private police organisations in 19th century Britain were mostly employers' associations, which exercised monopolistic surveillance over particular industries or territories (Godfrey and Cox, 2013); not until the interwar years were there signs that a genuine market in private policing was emerging in Britain. It is the growth of this market – rather than the growth of private policing as such – which perhaps constitutes the greatest departure from the established structure of security enterprise since the Second World War (see also Jones and Newburn, 1998).

More broadly, the contemporary era has witnessed further diversification in security enterprise, and substantial consolidation within the security industry itself. Electronic security has assumed an ever-greater share of security enterprise, particularly with the expansion of surveillance technologies (Closed Circuit Television, tracking devices, etc.) and computer security software and systems management. The latter half of the 20th century also saw the progressive consolidation of major national security firms by merger and acquisition; many once-famous brand names are now subsumed within various international security conglomerates.

Further research on this neglected field is required, yet one can nonetheless venture a few general claims regarding the history of the security industry. Firstly, the formation and subsequent growth of the security industry has paralleled the rise of public policing; hence, historically, there is no conflict between public and private supply of security. Secondly, while markets in policing developed prodigiously in America, the development of the security industry more broadly was as much a feature of modern British as it was of American history (cf. Miller, 2013). Finally, innovation in private security provision has been driven primarily by the needs of private companies; while they have since extended to public and domestic settings, most major forms of private security provision owe their origins to demand for the protection of commercial and industrial property.

David Churchill

Readings

Churchill, D. (2015) 'The spectacle of security: lock-picking competitions and the security industry in mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 80: 52-74.

Churchill, D. (2016) 'Security and visions of the criminal: technology, professional criminality and social change in Victorian and Edwardian Britain', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 56(5): 857-76.

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Biography:

David Churchill is Lecturer in Criminal Justice at the University of Leeds. He works on policing, security and crime control in Britain since the eighteenth century. He has written several articles on these themes, and is currently completing a book on policing and civilian crime control in the Victorian city. He also works on historical criminology, and is interested in how historical research can be used to speak to present issues and challenges in crime and justice.