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## Cultural and symbolic capital in the market for security: police-private security relations in Mexico and the United Kingdom

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# Cultural and symbolic capital in the market for security: police-private security relations in Mexico and the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has observed how private security actors often draw upon the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in their everyday operations. This practice can range from issuing frontline private security officers with police-like uniforms and patrol cars to recruiting former senior police officers into highly visible corporate positions. Geographical variations in this dynamic are little understood, however. In this article, we identify and shed light upon one emergent pattern. In those countries where the police enjoy high levels of public trust and confidence, private security actors can be found openly and directly borrowing from the cultural and symbolic capital of this key state institution to enhance their status. By contrast, in those countries where the police are plagued by a poor reputation, these actors commonly display a far more ambiguous relationship with these forms of capital, working both through and against them, often at the same time. Focusing on the UK and Mexican cases, and drawing upon a combination of Bourdieusian frameworks, we argue that the key to understanding this pattern is the distinction between the objectified (non-human) cultural capital of the police (uniforms, vehicles, etc) and the embodied (human) cultural capital of the police (police officers themselves). While the former enjoys a symbolic value in the market for security which transcends variations in public trust and confidence in the police, the latter is far more intimately connected to localised police traditions and practices, good or bad. This in turn leads to novel patterns in the global plural policing landscape.

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## Introduction

Over the past half century, the private security industry has expanded rapidly across the globe, taking on a range of crime control functions often regarded as the exclusive preserve of the police, such as mobile patrol, investigation, detention and the protection of critical infrastructure. Today the industry is worth approximately \$140 billion and private security officers outnumber police officers in no less than 40 countries, including China, South Africa and the United States (Provost 2017, p. 20). This growth has not occurred in an unfettered marketplace, however. The historical imprint of the police in this sphere of activity means that private security actors are frequently required to align their everyday activities with the cultural and symbolic capital of this state institution in their pursuit of profit and power. This practice can range from issuing frontline private

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security officers with police-like uniforms and patrol cars to recruiting former senior police officers into highly visible corporate positions. These processes of appropriation in turn give rise to distinctive plural policing assemblages which blur the public-private divide.

As scholarship on this political-economic dynamic has progressed over recent years, a notable yet until now unremarked upon geographical pattern has started to emerge. In those countries where the police enjoy high levels of public trust and confidence, private security actors can be found openly and directly borrowing from the cultural and symbolic capital of this state institution to enhance the status of their everyday operations (see for example: White 2010, Leloup 2019). By contrast, in those countries where the police are plagued by a poor reputation, private security actors often display a far more ambiguous relationship with these forms of capital, working both through and against them, often at the same time (see for example: Puck 2017a, Diphooorn 2020). These observations present an interesting puzzle about how private security actors engage with the materialities and normativities surrounding the police in different parts of the globe. While it is possible to make some sense of this puzzle through the extant scholarship, this line of enquiry is stymied by one issue – to date there has been no systematic comparison in this area of research involving two countries characterised by very different levels of public trust and confidence in the police. In this article, we address this gap through a comparison of how private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in the UK (which has comparatively high levels of public trust and confidence in the police) and Mexico (which has comparatively low levels of public trust and confidence in the police).

To facilitate this comparison, we use a combination of Bourdieusian frameworks. We begin with Abrahamsen and Williams' (2011) global security assemblages framework which conceptualises how economic capital (money, stocks, shares and corporate assets), cultural capital (labour, knowledge and expertise) and symbolic capital (recognised legitimacy and authority) are realised by different actors within the state-centric security field, leading to socio-spatial configurations which cut across the public-private divide. We then (re)introduce the distinction between objectified (non-human) and embodied (human) cultural capital – a key feature of Bourdieu's (1986) writings but absent from Abrahamsen and Williams' formulation – to clarify how private security actors place value upon the different forms of cultural capital associated with the police. We finally incorporate Diphooorn and Grassiani's (2016) notion of securitising capital to specify the process by which private security actors transform these different forms of cultural capital into symbolic capital in an attempt to elevate the standing of their everyday operations.

Through this lens, we advance two headline findings. First, in both the UK and Mexico, private security actors routinely transform the objectified cultural capital of the police into symbolic capital (for example, by wearing police-like uniforms and driving police-like cars) so as to augment their legitimacy and authority in the state-centric security field. Second, in the UK this process of appropriation extends to the embodied cultural capital of the police (for instance, by recruiting ex-police officers into their corporate ranks), whereas in Mexico private security actors are more likely to distance themselves from this particular form of cultural capital due to concerns about becoming associated with police corruption, brutality and incompetence. From these findings we make the more general argument while objectified cultural capital appears to have a symbolic value in the market for security which transcends localised variations in public trust and confidence in the police, embodied cultural capital does not. Its symbolic value is far more intimately connected to localised police traditions and practices, rising and falling where trust and confidence in the police is high and low.

In addition to deepening our understanding of a complex geographical puzzle in the market for security, this argument makes three other contributions to the extant private security and plural policing scholarship. To begin with, it adds important observations to the political-economic literature on the relationship between the state, market and security provision (see: Loader and Walker 2007, White 2010). At the same time, it responds to Diphooorn's (2020, p. 149) recent call 'for more in-depth studies on the role of materialities in policing scholarship' which, she explains, requires 'a key focus

on how more mundane objects, such as the radio, handcuff, uniform, vehicle, baton, and many more define everyday policing practices and interactions'. Finally, it further develops the comparative literature in this field of research by mapping out new patterns of convergence and divergence which stretch right across the global plural policing landscape. Indeed, it is one of just a very small handful of studies which compares any aspect of the private security industry across disparate regions of the globe (for other examples, see: Davis *et al.* 2003, Nalla *et al.* 2017, Kim *et al.* 2018, Singh and Light 2019).

The article is divided into seven sections. The next section reviews the extant literature on the relationship between the state, market and security provision to contextualise our contribution. The subsequent section maps out the combination of Bourdieusian frameworks which underpin our empirical analysis and provides a note on methodology. The following section profiles the UK and Mexican security fields, with a focus on the different levels and articulations of public trust and confidence in the police. The ensuing section sketches out the economic capital of private security actors in these countries to give sense of the size, scale and status of their operations. The remaining two empirical sections then explore how these actors transform the objectified and embodied cultural capital of the police into symbolic capital in these countries, highlighting the patterns of convergence and divergence which run through our main argument. The final section draws together our comparison, before reflecting on its implications for this area of scholarship.

## **State, market and security**

Scholarship on private security and plural policing first emerged in the 1970s and has gathered momentum ever since. It is now a diverse and thriving subfield which showcases a range of normative, theoretical and geographical orientations. It therefore defies simple categorisation and any attempt to do so runs the risk of underplaying the nuance and complexity of carefully put together enquiry. For present purposes, however, it is instructive to make a rough distinction between two broad approaches towards understanding the relationship between the state, market and security provision in this area of scholarship to contextualise the original contribution of this article.

The first (and probably most prominent) approach cleaves towards a neoclassical economic logic which views the state and market as independent but interacting spheres of activity (see Gamble *et al.* 1996). From this standpoint, the behaviours of public and private security actors are defined exclusively by their status inside either one of these spheres. That is, police actors are governed by their straightforward pursuit of the public good, whereas private security actors are guided by their quest for profit maximisation. Relations between these actors are accordingly represented as two neatly drawn worlds colliding, sometimes harmoniously, other times not (White and Gill 2013). Scholarship on private security and plural policing is replete with studies in this vein, increasingly under the guise of the prominent 'nodal mapping' or 'nodal governance' perspective (Wood and Shearing 2007). In terms of the present discussion, the most important feature of these studies is that they tend to look past the historical legacy of the police and its impact upon the underlying constitution of the marketplace. They have a propensity to skip over the fact that private security actors regularly conduct their operations in a police-like manner even where the police themselves are nowhere to be seen because this is what many consumers and onlookers want from the market. This is not a criticism. It is simply that this structural interpenetration of the state and market is denied analytical space by the prevailing neoclassical economic logic.

The second approach – which serves as the touchstone for this article – leans towards a political-economic logic which sees the state and market as mutually constitutive spheres of activity. In this view, rather than being animated solely by the laws of supply and demand in a kind of economic vacuum, the market is also deeply shaped by a range of political institutions, inequalities, strategies and legacies (see Gamble *et al.* 1996). When it comes to the market for security, one of the most written about dynamics relates to how the widespread attachment to the police as the chief guarantor of social order gives rise to market signals which privilege the materialities and normativities

surrounding this core state institution. These signals in turn encourage private security actors to align their operations with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in their everyday operations, regardless of whether or not the police themselves are actually on the scene (Loader and Walker 2007, White 2012). While research along these lines is limited in volume – especially when compared to the multitude of studies conducted in line with the neoclassical economic paradigm – it is nonetheless growing. Indeed, in our view, it has now reached the point where it is possible to observe an interesting geographical pattern taking shape.

This scholarship suggests that in countries where the police enjoy comparatively high levels of public trust and confidence, private security actors openly align their operations with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in a variety of ways. For instance, by dressing frontline officers up in police-like uniforms; deploying these officers in police-like vehicles; recruiting former police officers into highly visible corporate positions; using the vocabulary of the police in their day-to-day communications; seeking out contractual (outsourced) and non-contractual (non-outsourced) partnerships with the police at every opportunity; advertising such partnerships to potential customers; and so on. Various combinations of these strategies have been documented in, among others, Australia (Prenzler and Sarre 2012), Austria (Terpstra 2017), Belgium (Leloup 2019, Leloup and White 2021), Canada (Rigakos 2002, Walby *et al.* 2016) and the United Kingdom (White 2010, 2012, 2014, Thumala *et al.* 2011, Leloup and White 2021). At the same time, this scholarship indicates that in countries where the police are plagued with comparatively low levels of public trust and confidence a different scenario unfolds. While private security actors do still operationalise some of these practices, their approach is generally more cautious and piecemeal. They tend to be far more mindful about how they represent their relations with an institution commonly associated with corruption, brutality and/or incompetence. As a consequence, they tread a fine line between simultaneously appealing to and dissociating themselves from the cultural and symbolic capital of the police. Traces of this more complex dynamic have been observed in, for example, Brazil (da Silva Lopes 2018), Kenya (Diphooorn 2015, 2020), Nigeria (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011) and Mexico (Puck 2017a, 2017b).

In these examples, we think it is possible to glimpse the beginnings of an interesting geographical pattern relating to how private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in countries which have different levels of public trust and confidence in this state institution. It is important not to overplay its salience at this stage. These observations come from only a small handful of case studies. Nevertheless, in our view this pattern is worthy of further investigation, not only because it has previously gone unremarked upon and is thus little understood, but also because it makes sense. Intuitively, it seems perfectly logical for private security actors to assess the credentials of localised police institutions before drawing upon their legitimacy and authority. As such, it is likely to be a pattern which repeats beyond this small cluster of examples and may therefore hold far-reaching implications for our understanding of the global plural policing landscape. As things stand, however, this line of enquiry can only go so far. This is because none of the above studies were written up with this pattern in mind. In their current form, they do not allow for in-depth investigation. This is the gap we address in the remainder of this article through our comparison of the UK and Mexico.

## **A Bourdieusian approach**

To develop a systematic comparison of how private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in different countries, we draw upon a combination of Bourdieusian frameworks. Our starting point is how Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) operationalise Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'capital' in their global security assemblages framework. 'Field' is a broad concept which relates to the terrain of human and non-human interactions in any defined sphere of social activity. Abrahamsen and Williams's key insight is that the terrain of the security field has been profoundly shaped by the way in which states throughout the modern era have sought to

centralise security provision within the public sphere. 'History weighs heavily on the security field', they write, 'which continues to be structured by norms and institutions (and forms of power) that have evolved from specific historic relations between security and the public sphere and by the positions occupied by public security actors embedded within them' (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011, p. 111). The emphasis here on 'public security actors' – which in most cases equates to the police – is especially important for the purposes of our discussion. We are above all concerned with how the materialities and normativities surrounding the police institution have come to flow through interactions in the security field, even in those countries where the state has either failed in or reversed its push towards centralisation. That is, we are interested in how this particular state institution functions as a kind of lightning rod for the mediation of long-standing and deeply embedded state-centric norms. As subsequent sections illustrate, this dynamic is key to understanding how private security actors engage with the police in both the UK and Mexico.

'Capital' is a more specific concept which relates to the various resources used by actors to navigate their way through any given field. While it comes in different forms, Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) focus on three – 'economic capital' (money, stocks, shares and corporate assets), 'cultural capital' (labour, knowledge and expertise) and 'symbolic capital' (recognised legitimacy and authority). The value attached to each form of capital is shaped by the sociological terrain of the field in question. In the security field, Abrahamsen and Williams reason, those forms of capital which resonate with the prevailing state-centric social norms take on an especially high value – for instance, those forms of capital which are somehow bound up with the materialities and normativities surrounding the police. For this reason, they continue, as actors compete to realise these most valuable forms of capital, they bring into effect distinctive assemblages – socio-spatial configurations which blur the public/private divide. As the following sections demonstrate, this portrayal of how capital is valued and realised in the security field is central to comprehending how private security actors approach the police in the UK and Mexico. For present purposes, however, we make two notable modifications to this part of the framework.

The first relates to the conceptualisation of cultural capital. Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) interpret this form of capital to mean labour, knowledge and expertise – a standard reading. However, we (re)introduce Bourdieu's (1986) distinction between 'objectified' and 'embodied' cultural capital. Objectified cultural capital relates to 'cultural goods' – such as writings, monuments, instruments and academic qualifications – each of which is 'effective ... only insofar as it is appropriated by agents and implemented and invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production' (Bourdieu 1986, pp. 243–247). We use this concept in relation to the uniforms, patrol vehicles, guns and other material paraphernalia employed by police actors in the line of duty. Embodied cultural capital, by contrast, refers to 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' – 'a labor of inculcation and assimilation ... [which] ... declines and dies with its bearer' (Bourdieu 1986, pp. 243–244). We use this concept to think about the labour, knowledge and expertise of police actors themselves. As later sections illustrate, the distinction between objectified and embodied cultural capital holds great significance when thinking about how private security actors assess the cultural value of the police in the UK and Mexico.

The second modification concerns the relationship between cultural and symbolic capital. Like most scholars writing in the Bourdieusian tradition, Abrahamsen and Williams assume that under certain conditions it is possible to translate capital from one form to another – a process they present as a relatively general principle. However, we are chiefly interested with one specific instance of translation – namely, the translation of cultural capital (objectified and embodied) into symbolic capital. To shed light on this particular dynamic, we draw insights from Diphorn and Grassiani's (2016, p. 435) notion of 'securitizing capital', which they define as 'the processes of acquiring symbolic capital through other forms of capital in the field of security' (p. 435). This involves, they explain, drawing attention to and generating wider recognition around those forms of capital which hold particular value in the state-centric security field – that is, giving them an open and unambiguous symbolic value over and above any other type of value they hold. As the ensuing sections



demonstrate, the way in which private security actors publicly appropriate or distance themselves from the embodied and objectified cultural capital of the police – that is, the extent to which they ‘securitise’ these different forms of capital – is crucial when interpreting the patterns of convergence and divergences which underpin our main argument.

Before proceeding to our analysis of the UK and Mexico cases, however, it is necessary to introduce our datasets. The UK dataset comprises an extensive review of primary and secondary documents relating to various aspects of private security and plural policing alongside 82 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the private security industry, police and government conducted between 2006 and 2014 (for detailed methodological discussion see: White 2010, 2014, 2015). The Mexico dataset is likewise made up of an extensive review of primary and secondary documents relating to private security and plural policing as well as 45 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the private security industry, police and government conducted in 2013 and 2014 (for a detailed methodological discussion see: Puck 2017a, 2017b). While these datasets were generated through separate pieces of research (see funding acknowledgements for details), we are confident they are sufficiently well-matched – i.e. both rest upon historical documentation and contemporaneous semi-structured interviews with similar actors – to facilitate the broad cross-national comparisons developed over the following pages.

## The security field

As Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) emphasise, the state-centric sociological terrain of the security field means that the cultural and symbolic capital of key state institutions such as the police assumes an especially high value (see also: Loader 1997, Loader and Walker 2007, White 2010, 2012, Thumala *et al.* 2011). This is not a straightforward and deterministic relationship, however. Throughout their writings, Abrahamsen and Williams place considerable emphasis on historical process and contingency. Following their lead, we should expect the precise value of this capital to be empirically open. In particular, we might expect it to vary in line with localised factors such as the level of public trust and confidence in the police. In this section, we explore such variations in the UK and Mexico, thereby setting out important context for our subsequent focus on how private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in these countries.

To begin with, it is necessary to give a brief history of the police in the UK. While the institution has long antecedents – stretching from the constables, sheriffs and watchmen of medieval times to the Bow Street Runners, Thames River Police and Royal Irish Constabulary of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – the most famous ‘first’ step in its development is the Metropolitan Police Act 1829. This legislation initiated the process of replacing the ‘old’ patchwork of police bodies in London with a ‘new’ workforce of centrally-controlled, professional and uniformed police officers tasked with controlling crime and maintaining order on the streets (Rawlings 2012). Further legislative provisions during the 1840s and 1850s then gradually rolled out variations of this model across the boroughs and counties of England, Scotland and Wales. Over the ensuing century, these local forces multiplied in number (there were 180 in England and Wales by the mid-twentieth century), extended their functional remit and recruited from an ever broader cross-section of society, making them ubiquitous throughout the country. A series of amalgamations over the past half century has since reduced the number of local police forces down to 43 in England and Wales and one in Scotland (there is also one force in Northern Ireland, but it has a far more complicated and conflict-ridden history) (Emsley 2012). Though, at the same time, police officer numbers continued to rise across the United Kingdom during this time, reaching a 2010 high of 176,100. Post-financial crisis austerity cuts have subsequently brought this figure down to 153,000 (as of March 2020) (Allen and Zayed 2021, p. 3).

Even though the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 enjoyed relatively smooth passage through Parliament, it was some time before the public started to display widespread trust and confidence in the police. Broadly speaking, while the wealthier classes viewed the police as a threat to their liberty, the



poorer classes regarded the police as an instrument of class oppression. Through complementary processes of professionalisation and democratisation over the subsequent century, however, the police gradually started to earn trust and confidence in many quarters (Reiner 2010). The 1962 Royal Commission on the Police, for instance, discovered that overall 83% of the public felt 'great respect' for the police (Loader and Mulcahy 2003, p. 4). To be sure, since this so-called 'golden age', institutionalised discrimination, scandals and rising crime rates have chipped away at this 'great respect', especially among racial minority groups (see for example the London-based public perceptions data collected by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Gallup's (2018) most recent Law and Order Index rankings – a composite of confidence in local police, perceptions of safety and experiences of victimisation – give the UK a score of 86/100, placing the country a respectable 21st out of 142 countries.

Over the past two centuries, the police have therefore expanded in size and function, earning widespread if slightly diminishing public trust and confidence along the way. These historical trends have in turn cultivated, in Loader and Mulcahy's (2003, p. 43) words, 'a set of predispositions which operate in such a way that when people think of crime and order they reach, as it were, *instinctively* for the police'. This does not mean the institution is immune from criticism. Far from it. As Skinns (2014, p. 238) observes: 'in recent times, hardly a week or even a day has passed without a story in the media exploring controversy, criticism or concern in relation to the police'. Yet, the status of the institution itself is rarely questioned, even against the backdrop of recent scandals over institutionalised racism (Loader 2020). In the UK security field, then, the cultural and symbolic capital of the police security takes on a relatively high value.

In Mexico, the first steps towards the establishment of a modern police institution were made under the reign of Porfirio Diaz (1876–1911), whose authoritarian regime sought to increase the strength and reach of the federal government while, at the same time, eliminating threats to the political order. This process began with the Mexico City police, which in 1879 underwent a period of reform 'to professionalize the service and centralize control of agents' (Piccato 2001, p. 41). Police officers were hired as full-time employees, issued uniforms and made accountable to their superiors in a new hierarchical structure whereby the police inspector general answered to the Governor of the Federal District, who was in turn appointed by the president (Piccato 2001, pp. 41–42). Following the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), and during the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (1929–2000), the police continued to expand in size, function and complexity (Davis 2006, pp. 62–64). Today the police are divided geographically into federal, state and municipal departments, all with different responsibilities. Each department is then further subdivided into preventive, ministerial and transit police agencies. In total, there are now more than 2,000 police departments and agencies in Mexico, comprising approximately 544,000 officers (Sabet 2012, Meyer 2014).

Broadly speaking, however, the police have not enjoyed a good reputation. Throughout the twentieth century, the police were primarily used to augment state influence and repress political threats rather than to uphold citizen rights in an equitable and fair manner. Furthermore, police officers were permanently under-resourced, creating a strong incentive to generate revenue through bribery and corruption (Muller 2012). With the onset of democratisation and the fall of the PRI around the turn of the twenty-first century, efforts were again made to reform the police, but officers still tended to be poorly educated, inadequately trained and ill-equipped and frequently operated within a culture of impunity, bribery and corruption (Moloeznik 2009, Sabet 2012). As such, public trust and confidence in the institution has remained low right across the socio-economic spectrum. A relatively recent Parametría (2014) poll, for example, revealed that only 29% and 18% of Mexicans have confidence in the federal and state police, respectively – indeed, the state police ranked second to last of the 31 institutions on the list. Likewise, the latest Transparency International (2017) Global Corruption Barometer Report found that 63% of Mexicans believe most, if not all, police officers are corrupt – just 3% of those surveyed view the institution as upstanding. Lastly, Gallup's (2018) latest Law and Order

Index rankings give Mexico a score of 58/100, placing the country a troubling 136th out of 142 countries.

Despite this lack of public trust and confidence, however, the institution is nevertheless associated with some positive sentiments. In his study of policing in Mexico City, for example, Muller (2012, p. 195) observed how in both middle-class and working-class neighbourhoods ‘the police were often imagined as the guarantors of order, a perception which reflects the deep-seated local “police fetishism” held by the people’. This reinforces Loader’s (1997, p. 12) remark that ‘a deep emotional commitment to the idea of policing can all too easily co-exist with some stringent criticism of the police institution and its performance’. It also indicates that in the Mexican security field the police institution does have some kind of cultural and symbolic value, even though it comes with far more ‘baggage’ than the corresponding capital in the UK. This geographical variation holds important implications when it comes to understanding how private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of the police in these two countries. Before we turn to this dynamic, however, it is necessary to introduce the economic capital of these actors – that is, how they came to operate in these security fields together with the size, scope and status of their operations.

## Economic capital

In recent decades, private security actors have proven themselves to be highly adept in their pursuit of economic capital (money, stocks, shares and corporate assets) right across the globe. Their story is not one of easy and unbridled success, however. As Abrahamsen and Williams (2011) note, this pursuit has a tendency to grate against deeply embedded state-centric expectations about how security ought to be delivered – that is, the sociological terrain of the security field (see also: Loader 1997, Loader and Walker 2007, White 2010, 2012, Thumala *et al.* 2011). This means that while private security actors are ubiquitous throughout the global plural policing landscape, their everyday operations are frequently found lacking in legitimacy and authority. Against this backdrop, in this section we explore the size, scope and status of this economic capital in the UK and Mexico, adding further context for our ensuing focus on how and why private security actors engage with the cultural and symbolic capital of police in these countries.

Before the emergence of the modern police, localised private security arrangements were commonplace throughout the UK, with watchmen and guards readily available to the wealthier classes (Johnston 1992). It is commonly thought that such arrangements disappeared during the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as the police gradually assumed a monopoly over crime control. This is a misconception, however. Watchmen and guards continued to operate in commercial spaces throughout the Victorian and Edwardian eras (Churchill 2017). What remains correct, though, is that the large private security companies which dominate the sector today such as G4S, Mitie and Securitas did not emerge until the post-World War II era. This growth was facilitated by a range of factors including escalating crime rates, the rise of multinational corporations, the emergence of mass private property and neoliberal policy-making (White 2012, 2020a). Responding to these growth factors, private security actors have been able to accumulate considerable economic capital. In 2018, for instance, G4S alone boasted a £784 million annual turnover in the UK, while the sector as a whole played host to no less than 340,000 licensed private security officers – more than double the number of police officers (White 2020a, p. 132). At the same time, however, this accumulation has encountered cultural resistance. The widespread attachment to state institutions (especially the police) in this sphere of activity means that for many individuals, communities and businesses these companies operate in the shadow of their public sector counterparts. It has been noted many times how transactions in this market take the form of a ‘grudge’ purchase – an exchange which elicits negative rather than positive consumer sentiments (White 2010, Loader *et al.* 2015). Thumala *et al.* (2011) describe these transactions as a ‘tainted trade’, neatly capturing the troubled status of this economic capital.

In Mexico, private security arrangements were also commonplace during the nineteenth century, especially in the privately-owned *haciendas* left behind by the Spanish empire. While these arrangements thinned out with the development of the modern police, watchmen, guards and investigators continued to operate in both urban and rural areas during the early- to mid-twentieth century. As in the UK, though, large private security companies did not emerge until the post-World War II era, culminating in something of a boom over the past three decades (Muller 2010). Today the sector comprises a mix of local companies – many of which are small unregulated ragtag outfits colloquially known as ‘patitos’ – and multinational corporations such as G4S and Securitas. Together they employ somewhere between 500,000 and 600,000 individuals, with an estimated annual turnover of roughly \$1.5 billion (Eschenbacher 2018, Robert Strauss Center 2018, p.13). While many of the factors driving this accumulation of economic capital are the same as those in the UK – for instance, escalating crime rates and neoliberal policy-making – one stands out in contrast. In Mexico, low public trust and confidence in the police means that private security companies are often preferred to their public sector counterparts as a response to crime and disorder (Davis 2006, Muller 2010). It is thus perhaps somewhat paradoxical – though consistent with the logic of Abrahamsen and Williams’s (2011) writings – to find that this economic capital still appears to grate against the sociological terrain of the security field. Media outlets, for instance, regularly give expression to deep-seated anxieties about the status of this capital, labelling it a ‘Frankenstein’ and a ‘business of fear’ (Frutos 2014, Camacho 2017), raising concerns that ‘security has stopped being a right as it is converted into a commercial good,’ and calling attention to the fact that private security companies are only delivering ‘protection to those who can pay for it’ (*El Proceso* 2015, Higadera 2017).

Private security actors in the UK and Mexico have thus clearly accumulated substantial economic capital over recent decades. Yet in both countries this capital has a tendency to conjure up negative connotations in the public imagination – it sits uncomfortably within the state-centric sociological terrain of the security field. This observation is central to our line of enquiry. For it is this ‘tainted’ status which provides an incentive for private security actors to seek out the valuable cultural and symbolic capital of the police in their pursuit of profit and power. As previously noted, however, this dynamic play outs slightly differently in each country due to structural variations in the respective security fields – in particular, variations in public trust and confidence in the police. Our main contention here is that the key to understanding these variations lies in the distinction between objectified and embodied cultural capital.

### Objectified cultural capital

In thinking through how private security actors assess the cultural capital of the police before deciding whether or not to transform it into symbolic capital, we draw insights from Bourdieu (1986) and Diphorn and Grassiani (2016). That is, we are specifically interested in the extent to which private security actors attempt to transform the objectified cultural capital of the police (non-human articulations of labour, knowledge and expertise) and the embodied cultural capital of the police (human forms of labour, knowledge and expertise) into symbolic capital (recognised legitimacy and authority) to enhance the status of their ‘tainted’ economic capital in the state-centric security field. In this section, we examine the dynamics surrounding the objectified cultural capital of the police.

It has long been observed how the centralisation of security provision in the public sphere has imbued those material objects attached to the classic image of the police officer with considerable cultural and symbolic value. For example, Bell (1982, pp. 25–6) observes how

the perceived authority associated with the police uniform has been an essential ingredient of the police role . . . . [it] functions as a filter and a barrier communicating nonverbally to the citizens who the police are and what their function or role will be.

It is therefore unsurprising to discover that, in their quest to elevate the status of their economic capital, private security actors have routinely sought to transform this objectified cultural capital

into symbolic capital by, for instance, dressing up their public-facing frontline officers in police-like uniforms and deploying them in police-like patrol cars. As Thumala *et al.* (2011, p.294) remark, 'the use of uniforms, badges and vehicles that resemble those of the police (and are designed to do so) are all indicative of an attempt to secure legitimacy by association'. Significantly, this process is evident in both the UK and Mexico.

In the post-war era, private security companies in the UK have consistently deployed their frontline officers in police-like uniforms. Indeed, it was this practice which first brought these companies to the attention of the Home Office and police in the 1950s, both of which immediately voiced concerns. As one senior police officer remarked in a 1959 communication to his colleague, this practice

raises the problem of whether they [private security officers] are likely, because of the similarity in uniform, to become identified with the police in the eyes of the public, and in this respect it seems to be a most undesirable development. (White 2010, p. 56)

Soon after this observation, the Home Office established the Working Party on Mock Uniforms and Vehicles and duly pushed through an amendment to the Police Act 1964 making it easier to prosecute private security actors for issuing and wearing such uniforms (White 2010). This did not end the practice, however. A decade later, Bunyan (1977, p. 235) was still able to observe how 'most [private security] firms use police or military-style uniforms' - and this trend continues today. Only a cursory glance at promotional materials in the sector reveals images of private security officers dressed in police-like uniforms standing next to blue, black and white patrol cars. In perhaps the most extreme example, the London-based company My Local Bobby deploys its officers in 1950s-style police tunics designed in consultation with the London School of Fashion so as to conjure up reassuring associations with the so-called golden age of the police (White 2020b). Significantly, parallel dynamics are observable in Mexico.

In the post-revolutionary era, Mexican authorities developed similar concerns over the growing use of police imagery in the nascent private security industry. During the first half of the twentieth century, groups of former combatants from the Mexican Revolution roamed city streets in search of protection contracts. Many of these proto-private security officers wore police-like uniforms and carried police-like badges to enhance their public credentials. In 1948, the government passed federal legislation specifically outlawing these practices. Private security officers were forbidden from carrying badges or displaying the national shield or the 'national colors' on their credentials and business cards (*Diario Oficial de la Federación* 1948). However, this trend once again came to the fore with the ascendancy of the large modern private security companies in the 1960s and 1970s. This prompted a further round of federal regulations in 1985 which proscribed the use of police and military colours, logos and emblems on uniforms and vehicles issued by private security companies (Puck 2017b). During the 1990s, both the Federal District and individual states then added further stipulations. In Mexico City, for instance, private security patrol cars are not authorised to have sirens (*Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal* 2014), while in Jalisco uniforms worn by private security officers are not permitted to display the words *policía*, *agentes*, and *investigadores* (Jalisco State Government 2004). Similar to the UK, however, companies have continued to disregard these measures in an effort to appropriate the much sought-after paraphernalia of the police. Today private security officers frequently wear navy or royal blue uniforms with official-looking badges and insignias, carry Billy clubs and walkie-talkies and drive cars with sirens in a conscious effort to invoke police imagery (Puck 2017a, 2017b).

In both countries, then, it is common practice for private security companies to appropriate the objectified cultural capital of the police by issuing their officers with police-like uniforms, patrol cars and other paraphernalia. Moreover, by concentrating this practice on the frontline where it is openly visible to onlookers, they are not simply appropriating this capital as an end in itself. Following the logic of Diphorn and Grassiani (2016), they are transforming it into symbolic capital. They are building a form of legitimacy and authority which is specifically designed to generate wide recognition among members of the public - a prized attribute in a line of work centred upon the exercise of

social control over populations and spaces. In terms of the present discussion, of course, perhaps the most interesting dimension of these practices is their similarity across the UK and Mexico, where the levels of public trust and confidence in the police are so different. This suggests a notable disconnect between, on one side, the symbolic value of this objectified cultural capital and, on the other side, localised variations in police traditions and practices. The calculation running through these practices is that police-like uniforms, badges, cars and so on are able to communicate affirmative messages of legitimacy and authority even when the actions of the police officers who use them fall short of these virtues. This means private security actors can harness the symbolic value of these inanimate material items without becoming too closely associated with these disreputable individuals. As a consequence, we can see clear convergences here between the UK and Mexico. When it comes to the embodied cultural capital of the police, however, a different picture emerges.

### **Embodied cultural capital**

In addition to objectified cultural capital, private security actors may also seek to transform the embodied cultural capital of the police into symbolic capital. However, the mechanics of doing so are slightly different. Embodied cultural capital is not stored in inanimate material items like objectified cultural capital, but rather bound up with the labour, knowledge and expertise of (ex-)police officers themselves. The agentic nature of this capital means that it is more directly linked to localised police traditions and practices. Put simply, one cannot blame a uniform for malpractice, but one can blame the officer wearing the uniform. The process of transforming the embodied cultural capital of the police into symbolic capital therefore comes with more calculations and risks attached. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, here we see some divergences between the UK and Mexico due to the different levels of public trust and confidence in the police.

In the UK, police officers are for the most part relatively well-trained, well-paid and well-regarded by the public. This means that private security companies are usually eager to recruit ex-police officers into their corporate ranks to appropriate this valuable form of embodied cultural capital. In a common recruitment strategy, for example, the British company Interforce asks in bold letters on the front page of its website: 'Do you have transferable skills? Are you an Ex-Police Officer or security professional? If so, we would like to hear from you.'<sup>2</sup> However, this cross-sectoral move is most common at the top of the corporate pyramid where there is an established practice of companies head-hunting and taking on retired senior police officers into well-paid and highly visible executive and board level positions. This practice dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when both Group 4 and Securicor lured a series of ex-Assistant Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police into Director roles (White 2010). By 2012, this trend had become so prominent that the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee deliberated upon – though did not ultimately action – the establishment of a register to document the transition of senior police officers to the executives or boards of private security companies (Peachy and Lakhani 2012). Of course, practices in this vein do not hold universal appeal, for although the police enjoy favourable public perceptions at the aggregate level, they are less well regarded in certain quarters due to the legacy of institutionalised discrimination, scandals and malpractice. Yet these practices do open up sufficient opportunities to make them a common feature of the UK market for security. Significantly, though, in this instance we do not find parallel dynamics in Mexico – quite the opposite in fact.

In Mexico, the low level of public trust and confidence in the police means that, instead of seeking out ex-police officers for their embodied cultural capital, private security companies actively distance themselves from this controversial workforce. Reflecting general public sentiment, for instance, private security executives have been recorded variously describing police officers as poorly trained, underpaid, disingenuous, crafty, corrupt, contaminated, poorly respected, and clown-like (Puck 2017a, p. 11). In stark contrast to recruitment practices in the UK, job adverts posted in Mexican newspapers and flyers by private security companies frequently proclaim in bold capitalised font 'NO EX POLICIAS', both to cut off this employment transition and to inform potential customers

that their companies are not associating with this tarnished embodied cultural capital. Indeed, the President of the American Society for Industry Security (ASIS, the largest private security trade association in the world) International Northern Mexico Chapter estimates that no less than 90% of Mexican companies will refuse to hire ex-police officers under any circumstances whatsoever (Puck 2017b, p. 155). As one private security consultant neatly explains: avoiding all contact with the police serves as ‘my protection against corruption’ (Puck 2017a, p. 15).

When it comes to how private security actors assess and engage with the embodied cultural capital of the police, we therefore see clear divergences between the UK and Mexico. In the UK, comparatively high levels of trust and confidence in the police mean that the embodied cultural capital of this institution takes on a high value in the market for security and is readily appropriated by private security companies. While this practice could certainly be interpreted as an end in itself through the access it provides to desirable knowledge and expertise, the fact that it is performed in such an open and visible manner suggests that it simultaneously (if not primarily) represents an attempt to accumulate symbolic capital. It is, in other words, another mechanism through which to generate recognised legitimacy and authority around their otherwise ‘tainted’ economic capital in the state-centric sociological terrain of the security field. It thus follows roughly the same logic as the dynamics surrounding objectified cultural capital. In Mexico, by contrast, the comparatively low levels of public trust and confidence in the police not only mean that private security actors are seemingly disinterested in this form of cultural capital on its own terms, but they also make a grandiose display of openly distancing themselves from it. In this scenario, it is their public rejection of the embodied cultural capital of the police which actually serves to enhance their symbolic capital. All of these observations, of course, relate to the same overarching point – namely, that in the market for security the embodied cultural capital of the police is far more intimately connected to localised police traditions and practice, good or bad.

## Conclusion

In this article, we set out to shed light on an emergent geographical pattern in the extant private security and plural policing scholarship. In those countries where the police enjoy high levels of public trust and confidence, private security actors can be found openly and directly borrowing from the cultural and symbolic capital of this key state institution to elevate the status of their everyday operations, whereas in those countries where the police are plagued by a poor reputation, these actors display a far more ambiguous relationship with these forms of capital, working both through and against them, often at the same time. Investigating the UK and Mexican cases through a combination of Bourdieusian frameworks, we have now illustrated that in order to understand this pattern in more depth, it is instructive to focus on the distinction between objectified and embodied cultural capital. This is illustrated in our two headline findings. First, in both the UK and Mexico, private security actors seek to transform the objectified cultural capital of the police into symbolic capital so as to elevate their status in the state-centric security field. Second, while in the UK this practice extends to the embodied cultural capital of the police, in Mexico private security actors are in fact more likely to distance themselves from this form of cultural capital due to concerns about being associated with police corruption, brutality and incompetence.

What this comparison suggests, in other words, is that the objectified cultural capital of the police holds its value in the market for security regardless of variations in public trust and confidence in the police. Its abstract nature seemingly appeals to a higher set of state-centric norms which remain largely unsullied by localised practices and experiences of police incompetence, corruption and brutality. In a sense, this capital is a product of and vessel for more than two hundred years of idealistic liberal rhetoric concerning the merits of delivering security as a public good and, as a consequence, has assumed a kind of transcendental quality. For this reason, it is readily embraced by private security actors in very different parts of the world as a way of enhancing their symbolic capital and, by extension, elevating the status of their ‘tainted’ economic capital. By contrast, the value of the



embodied cultural capital of the police in the market for security is far more sensitive to variations in these key indicators. Its agentic nature means that its value goes up and down where trust and confidence in the police is high and low. For better or worse, it cannot escape its connections to localised police traditions and practices and, as a consequence, lacks the same kind of transcendental quality. It is not universally embraced by private security actors in different parts of the globe, but rather subject to in situ assessments of value. In sum, then, the distinction between objectified and embodied cultural capital enables us to understand at a much deeper level a notable geographical pattern in the global plural policing landscape.

## Notes

1. [www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/data-and-statistics/public-voice-dashboard](http://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/mayors-office-policing-and-crime-mopac/data-and-statistics/public-voice-dashboard).
2. <https://interforce.org.uk/about-us/>.

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