

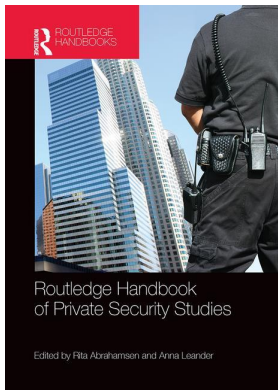
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GLOBAL SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES

Michael C. Williams

The study of security privatization and the emergence of a global private security industry is often framed in opposition to state authority and the public provision of security. As the sector has expanded and globalized, much academic debate has been about the extent to which the state is losing power and sovereignty, and thus getting weaker as the private is getting stronger. This was, and remains, a particularly strong narrative about security privatization in non-Western countries, where the rise of the private has often been treated as an indication – and sometimes also a cause – of state weakness and even failure. On occasion this argument is articulated as a downward spiral, where the state's inability to secure its territory and citizens is seen to have spurred the initial growth of private actors, with their existence in turn further undermining the strength, legitimacy and authority of the state. In Europe and North America, state sovereignty and authority has been an equally central topic of debate, but has taken a slightly different form. Rather than fears of incipient state failure, the rise of the private has here often been analysed as part of new forms of networked governance or multi-level governance. In this view, the state has outsourced some of its security functions and much as it may or may not be weakened by this, it continues to rule and regulate at a distance, in collaboration with a plethora of private non-state actors.

In both these framings, despite their differences, the nature of the state remains the unaltered – it might be weaker or stronger, it might lose or gain power, but as a basic unit or category of analysis it is unchanged and ontologically intact. This chapter suggests that such approaches cannot adequately capture what is at stake in security privatization. Both theoretically and empirically, the diverse processes of security privatization are part of a profound transformation of the state and its security functions, and there is no way of capturing these changes or their implications in a vocabulary that can speak only in terms of a stronger or weaker state. Instead what we are witnessing is a reconfiguring of the state and a re-articulation in different ways of the traditional distinctions between the public and the private and the global and the local. A powerful approach to these developments is to see them as the emergence of global security assemblages (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011). Global security assemblages are complex structures where a range of different global and local, public and private security agents and normativities interact, cooperate and compete to produce new institutions, practices and forms of security governance. These assemblages inhabit national settings but are simultaneously stretched across national boundaries in terms of actors, knowledge,

technologies, norms and values. Within them, state power is certainly reconfigured, but it is not always and necessarily weakened. Instead, novel security institutions and practices that cross the traditional boundaries between public and private, global and local are assembled, and the relative power of the diverse actors within the assemblage remains to be discovered.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the concept of assemblage and the distinctiveness of assemblage thinking. Turning to global security assemblages, it explores the processes that led to their emergence. One of the key insights of an assemblage approach is that assemblages are infinitely diverse, and hence it cannot start not from the assumption that the state is at the centre of security delivery and governance. Instead, it calls for empirically grounded theory, that is, a careful analysis of how different security actors, discourse, values, technologies, and so on, are assembled and brought together in different localities. In order to give a flavour of such theorizing from the ground up, the chapter introduces the Cape Town City Improvement District in South Africa, a global security assemblage that has produced new security practices and institutions and where the politics of protection – the questions of who gets secured and how – is stretched across the boundaries of the nation-state. The chapter concludes that because an analysis centred on assemblages opens up the possibility that the state and the security field might be differently assembled in different places, it is not only more sensitive to place and specificity, it also allows for a deeper understanding of the politics of security and the forces and histories that produce different global security assemblages.

Assembling security

Assemblage thinking is driven in large part by dissatisfaction with the dominant ontologies that have characterized social theory, including political science, International Relations and Security Studies. In particular, this relates to state centrism and the reification of the Weberian state within these disciplines – a commitment to the state that defines it as an entity with a monopoly of legitimate force within a given territory. Social scientists (and other actors, whether they recognize it or not) use theory to make sense of the world, to order complex social phenomena into categories and causal mechanisms, sometimes forcing the social world to conform to preconceived definitions and categories. Such theories can become straitjackets, deprived of explanatory value and unable to capture rapid change and social transformations on a global scale. This has been the case in perceptions of security privatization, where the idea that the growth of private and global security firms must necessarily come at the expense of national public actors has often seemed self-evident. But like much that at first glance seems self-evident, the reality is considerably more complex. Analyses of global security assemblages seek to capture that complexity.

In rejecting totalities and reified units of analysis such as state, society or capitalism, assemblage thinking focuses instead on provisional and historically contingent relations between heterogeneous elements, both human and non-human (Latour 2007). As such, assemblage thinking is characterized both by a particular kind of critique and by a particular orientation towards academic enquiry (McFarlane and Anderson 2011). As a critique, it questions the taken-for-granted nature of concepts such as state, society, and agency, and instead embraces an orientation and ethos that is more receptive to difference and emergence. The attraction of assemblage thinking is accordingly a more open and agnostic approach to the social world; the area of study is not predetermined by existing theories and categories, but is instead approached as something to be discovered in the way that different elements are fitted together into contingent systems of varying durability (Deleuze and Guattari 2003). As a new way of studying the global, assemblages are particularly attractive as they draw attention to multi-scalar connections,

abandoning strict dichotomies between the global and the local, the international and the domestic. It approaches the social world as one analytical field, and shows how assemblages both de-territorialize and re-territorialize (i.e. the assemblage is not wholly determined by its location within national settings but is instead indicative of the formation of new geographies of power).

That said, there is no single ‘assemblage theory’, nor one ‘assemblage methodology’ – indeed, to some assemblage thinking does not amount to a theory, but rather ‘a repository of methods and ontological stances towards the social’ (Acuto and Curtis 2014b: 3). This chapter approaches assemblages primarily as a methodology and as a process of formation, focusing on the concrete investigations that assemblages thinking makes possible and leaving aside the more philosophical stance implied, although the two are of course interlinked in numerous ways (see Acuto and Curtis 2014a). In particular, this chapter draws on Saskia Sassen’s (2006) work on globalization to explain the emergence of global security assemblages. For Sassen, globalization is first and foremost a process of realignment inside the state, not a process of ‘outside’ forces eroding a territorially distinct ‘inside’. As she observes in her analysis of the shifting relationship between territory, authority, and rights, it is the national state that has made today’s global era possible. Many of the activities, institutions and structures now identified with globalization came into existence at the direct instigation of national governments, and continue to operate through transformed national institutions that enable and facilitate their operation. More specifically, Sassen suggests that the development of contemporary global structures involves three key elements: a process of ‘disassembly’ in which functions previously carried out by public actors are transferred to private actors; the development of ‘capacities’ by private actors that allow them to act at a global level; and a process of ‘reassembly’ whereby these new actors and capabilities become part of global assemblages that are embedded in national settings but operate at a global scale. In this way, the disassembly of the national becomes constitutive of the global, in that ‘the territorial sovereign state, with its territorial fixity and exclusivity, represents a set of capabilities that eventually enable the formation or evolution of particular global systems’ (Sassen 2006: 21).

This partial self-disassembly of the state, combined with the diverse social, economic, and political dynamics that characterize late modernity (see Introduction, this volume), have facilitated the spectacular growth and globalization of the private security market detailed throughout this Handbook. While the public security sector was perhaps initially more resistant to the privatization ethos than services such as health and education, the delivery of security is now increasingly privatized, outsourced, or delivered in various forms of public–private partnerships. It is important to emphasize, however, that this expansion of private security is not a purely functional response to state restructuring and the outsourcing of previously public services, but is also linked in important ways to social and cultural transformations, including changing attitudes toward crime and punishment, and the pervasiveness of various mentalities of risk. This permissive and accommodating ideational environment has allowed some private security companies to acquire the capacities (e.g. analytic abilities and appropriate skills; organizational scale and structure; material and technological resources) to operate at a global level – whether in military support operations or in the more everyday protection of ‘life and assets’. The largest companies, such as G4S and Securitas, now span continents, their workforce dwarfing that of most national armies (see Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; [Chapter 5](#), this volume). They utilize more or less the same security technologies and approaches across the globe, reflecting the commodification of security as a technology delinked from the politics of specific localities.

As a result, it is increasingly difficult and empirically inaccurate to describe and analyse security provision and governance as contained within the boundaries of the nation–state.

Worldwide, from isolated resources enclaves to densely populated urban centres, the production and governance of security (and insecurity) involves a plethora of actors and norms, some local, some global, some public and some private. As a descriptive term, assemblage captures these new geographies of power that are simultaneously global and national, public and private: diverse hybrid structures that inhabit national settings but are stretched across national boundaries in terms of actors, knowledges, technologies, norms and values. While this may in certain settings be an indication of state weakness or pose a threat to the state, this is not universally the case – as the extensive private security sector in the United States shows. Such interpretations overlook the many ways in which the empowerment of the private security sector is directly linked to the shifts in governance and to transformations inside the state, and often operates with the active endorsement and encouragement of state authorities. Moreover, they risk reifying the state and seeing any deviation from the state monopoly over security as necessarily marking a decline in its authority and legitimacy. Global security assemblages do not represent a mechanistic process of disassembly and reassembly with uniform impacts. Instead they are better understood as boundary fields, in that they are neither private, nor public, neither local, nor global, but mark analytical spaces that lie between these common distinctions and require their own empirical investigation.

The notion of the global assemblage has been invoked to analyse the implications of security privatization in a range of diverse settings, including airports (Lippert and O'Connor 2003; Berndtsson and Stern 2011), urban environments (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011), surveillance (Haggerty and Ericson 2000) and resource extraction (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009, 2011). While by no means uniform in their interpretation and utilization of assemblage thinking, these studies forge a new path by drawing attention to the multiple possibilities and diversities of emerging security formations and their implications for the politics of security.

Security and the global city

As a brief illustration, consider urban security in Cape Town, South Africa, a global security assemblage that has not only produced new security institutions and practices but that is also almost constantly in the process of formation as it interacts with the complex politics of South African security. Following the end of apartheid, private security expanded at a phenomenal rate in South Africa, partly as a result of widespread fear of crime and an actual rise in crime. South Africa's security policy also became increasingly influenced by global trends in policing and public management, which led to a focus on outsourcing, privatization, and contracting of specialist services. Faced with dwindling public resources and escalating crime rates, the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the government chose to accept and incorporate the private sector into their security strategies. In the words of SAPS, there was a need for 'the police, the public, elected officials, government, business and other agencies to work in partnership to address crime and community safety' (quoted in Berg 2004: 227). The Department of Community Safety (2006: 6) similarly concluded that the 'SA Police Service can no longer be seen as the sole agency responsible for fighting crime ... other sectors of society with a force multiplying capacity must be called on to support the SA Police Service in their efforts'. As part of this transformation, some tasks have been specifically assigned as 'private' – police stations across South Africa are now, for example, guarded by private security companies in recognition that commercial guards are cheaper than police officers – while much day-to-day policing has been re-framed as a partnership with a multiplicity of private actors and local communities.

The Cape Town Central City Improvement District (CCID) initiative is one of the most extensive examples of such public-private policing partnerships. Like so-called Business

Improvement Districts that can be found in many major cities around the world, the CCID is a non-profit organization that seeks to make the city safe and secure, and to promote business and economic activity. It is an initiative of the Cape Town Partnership, a not-for-profit company founded by the City Council and the local business community, with an initial aim to reverse urban decay and capital flight from the city centre to surrounding suburbs and business parks. The CCID is funded through an additional tax on business property owners; its primary concern has been to increase security, and in 2006 when this fieldwork was undertaken, approximately 51 percent of the CCID's budget was allocated to security.

The CCID is in effect a large-scale partnership policing effort aimed at making central Cape Town safe and secure; an international city and a first class tourist destination. When the CCID started in 2000, Group4Securicor (G4S) was contracted as the main security provider.¹ At the start of the initiative, the CCID security force consisted of only seven officers, but it rapidly expanded to a total of six patrol vehicles, ten horse mounted officers and 60 foot patrol officers providing a 24-hour security presence in the city centre. At night, this force soon patrolled with 40 officers, supported by six vehicles. As a result, the presence of security personnel in the city increased significantly, and during daytime, with CCID vehicles and foot patrols frequently encountered throughout Cape Town's relatively compact city centre.

To a significant extent, the security of Cape Town was devolved to the largest security company in the world. The visibility of G4S's mounted, foot, and mobile patrols far exceeded the visibility of the police. Both the City Police and the SAPS concentrated their efforts in the poorer areas of town, where crime rates are highest, and the City Police dedicated only two mobile patrols to the city centre. Moreover, the police ceased to conduct foot patrols. Yet it would be incorrect to perceive the police as absent from Cape Town's security arrangement. G4S officers worked in close collaboration with the police, especially the City Police, but also the SAPS. CCID/G4S branded patrol vehicles included a City Police officer, although there were no police markings on the car. The CCID security patrols were also linked to the City Police control room by radio. Furthermore, G4S operated the Strategic Surveillance Unit (SSU), the control room that supervised Cape Town's 170 close circuit television cameras – cameras initially financed by the association 'Business Against Crime', and then donated to the city. Manned by around 50 G4S officers, reinforced by eight City Police officers, and in direct contact with the SAPS as well as the City Police, the SSU ensured mobile response to incidents. As part of the move towards community policing, G4S also participated in weekly sector policing fora to identify potential problems, share information and co-ordinate the provision of security with the SAPS and the City Police. G4S officers in the CCID also frequently provided support to police operations, for example, by providing perimeter security when police are searching a building or area. This is indicative of the breadth of change, seen also in the other CIDs around Cape Town and in other South African cities. The result was an assemblage of public and private, global and local security actors that G4S managers in interviews often referred to as a 'paradigm shift' in security provision.

At this point, the CCID was a striking example of the contemporary dissolution of the 'state, territory, authority' triptych that informs and underpins so many studies in International Relations (Barnett 2001). In Cape Town, as elsewhere on the African continent and across the globe, security governance, in the sense of the authoritative setting and enforcement of collective norms, increasingly transcends the nation state and includes private actors in extensive and influential roles. Cape Town's security arrangement was a global assemblage, made up of a multiplicity of actors, resources, discourses, norms and values. Drawing on a broad range of capacities and discourses for its empowerment, the CCID changed the landscape of policing and security in the city, giving private actors and their

corporate sponsors new roles and influence – and arguably disempowering others, such as street children, peddlers and informal vendors, who also make their living in the urban environment but who are frequently perceived as vectors of insecurity by city managers, business owners and tourists alike. But this transformation did not represent the simple privatization of downtown Cape Town, or the exclusion of public authorities and police forces. Instead, it marked a new set of structures that were at once public and private, global and local, whose assembly into the CCID structure profoundly affected the security provision and politics of the city.

As emphasized earlier in this chapter, one of the benefits of assemblage thinking is its ability to capture chance and the emergent character of the social world. The Cape Town global security assemblage is instructive in this regard, as the CCID has reacted and interacted with the changing politics and security logics of South Africa and beyond. The growth of private security in the immediate aftermath of apartheid was highly controversial in South Africa, in large part because cheap black labour was employed to guard white wealth and privilege. Private security and the idea of profiting from crime was also in many ways anathema to the ANC, a political party whose ideology was in part opposed to capitalism. The arrival of foreign private security companies such as G4S was also treated with suspicion, seen both as a potential threat to national sovereignty and as unwelcome competition for domestic firms (see Abrahamsen and Williams 2011: 96–102).

Such tensions have continued to simmer, and provide part of the explanation for the CCID's announcement in 2008 that G4S has been replaced with Iliso Protection Services – a fully black female-owned South African company. Since the change of service provider, the CCID security force has expanded to 230 guards, making it the largest safety and security force on the streets of Cape Town. The officers are now branded as 'Public Safety Officers', despite their 'private' funding. The close co-operation with the public police continues. In 2014, for example, the CCID's Public Safety Officers assisted law enforcement officers with over 2000 arrests (CCID 2014). They also remain closely involved in Cape Town's extensive network of surveillance CCTV, which with some 650 cameras is one of the largest public area surveillance projects on the African continent. Named Cyclops, the surveillance system is yet another illustration of how multiple actors and technologies come together in new and constantly shifting global security assemblages. In Cape Town, the power and influence of one global private security company may have waned, showing the continuation of competition and negotiation within the assemblage – as well as the importance of local actors and capacities, not just global ones. But even then 'local' developments interact with global influences, and security is still embedded in a complex transnational security architecture that is both a reflection and a significant component of the shifting structures of global governance.

Conclusion

Situating the emergence of security privatization and global security assemblages within an analysis of state disassembly and reassembly draws attention to the inadequacy of explanatory accounts that look at it only in terms of whether or not the state is losing power and sovereignty in a zero-sum game with non-state or global security actors. As Berndtsson and Stern observe with reference to the global security assemblage at Arlanda Airport in Sweden:

[To claim] that security is being provided or controlled by either public or private actors would be a vast oversimplification that obscures an intricate play of power extending far beyond the actors with whom we spoke. At the airport, overlapping

authorities, regulations, and activities illustrate the limits of political imaginaries based on maintaining clear-cut public–private or domestic–international distinctions.

(Berndtsson and Stern 2011: 417)

Instead, global assemblages highlight the fact that analysis should start from the actual practices of security and governance in a given setting and take account of shifting forms of power and authority involved.

Thus, rather than perceiving private security actors as existing outside the state, in the private domain, they are better understood as part of a continual negotiation of what is and is not the state. As this chapter shows, private security actors often operate in close co-operation with the state, and emerged as part of state restructuring and government policies. But this is not to say that global security assemblages are harmonious or stable structures. Instead, they are often marked by competition and struggles for power and influence. The very categories of public and private, global and local are resources in these struggles, with different actors appealing to different understandings of what should appropriately be ‘public’ and ‘private’ in order to strengthen their own positions. As such, global security assemblages call for an investigation of the new modalities of power through which the very categories of public/private and global/local are reconstituted.

The African continent provides a valuable illustration of the importance of this point, not least because in the popular (but also the scholarly) imagination private security in Africa remains associated with mercenaries, private armies, and failed states. Contrary to such tendencies, thinking in terms of assemblages opens up the possibility that the state might be differently assembled in different places. Because assemblage thinking is more agnostic about the ontology of the state, it offers a way of capturing the specificity of the state in different places – without endlessly pathologizing it as some kind of aberration or deviant form of an ideal Western, Weberian model. In global security assemblages where the state has weak administrative or governing capacities, and where the state’s financial, managerial and technical resources are often surpassed by private security companies, corporate capital or development organizations, the role of private security can be seen as crucial to both the continued functioning of state authority and the operations of international capital. Rather than reflecting an automatic decline of state sovereignty, security privatization can be analysed as reconfiguration of the very categories of state authority and its relationship to the public and the private, the global and the local.

Moreover, thinking in terms of assemblages allows us to connect apparently divergent dynamics of security privatization in different parts of the world, and to see their concrete links and causal connections. The dynamics of security privatization in the North, for instance, are often drastically different from the South. However, the two are often also deeply and intricately connected. Transformations in security governance in the northern countries, for instance, provided the pre-conditions for the emergence of significant private security firms that subsequently came to occupy key roles in the global industry and in places like the Cape Town Central City Improvement District. Similarly, shifts in the norms and discourses around security in the North – particularly the commodification of security and its treatment as a commodity within economic logics and free trade negotiations, rather than a matter solely of state sovereignty and public security, were crucial in creating a permissive (and even facilitating) environment for the expansion of private security firms. These developments did not ‘cause’ security privatization in the South, but they did have profound effects upon it, particularly in terms of the integration of global private security firms into other states and in constructing global security assemblages with important impacts within them. The notion of

assemblage thus helps break down the distinction between the near and the far, showing how the global is present in the local and vice versa.

Approaching security privatization in this manner and studying its specific impacts in particular global security assemblages can also help to begin to answer the important questions of its implications for security, equality, and development. Global security assemblages are not neutral. They often follow and reinforce dominant structures of wealth and power. At the same time, they are not always wholly exclusionary. They can also contribute to the production of the public ‘good’ of security, or to the provision of security to wider parts of the populace when state authorities are unable or unwilling to do so, or to do so alone – though as the case of Cape Town shows, how this occurs may go hand in hand with reinforcing inequalities in ways that require careful examination. Global security assemblages are often as politically complex in their implications as they are concretely complex in their operations. Yet it is precisely this complexity that must be captured if we are to provide normative evaluations and political responses adequate to the realities of global security privatization. Thinking in terms of assemblages can help develop the critical tools and perspectives necessary for this understanding and evaluation; and given that these processes and impacts of security privatization across the globe seem likely to continue to grow in importance, so too will the importance of thinking creatively and critically about how security is being assembled. Rather than beginning with a set of philosophical assumptions about the public and the private, this creates a research agenda that begins from the ground up, examining how these categories function in practice, how different actors relate to the security field, and with what political consequences.

Note

- 1 At that time G4S still traded in South Africa as Securicor, reflecting the relatively recent merger of the two companies. It later became G4S, and to avoid confusion it is referred to as such throughout this chapter.

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