Private Security Guards Policing Public Space

Private security guards are often portrayed as always promoting the client’s interest first, with an emphasis on preventing and reducing loss at private sites and with little or no regard of more broadly public interests (Sklansky, 2007). However, as pointed out by Singh & Kempa (2007: 298) much more is known about the actual practices and workings of the public police than about private policing organisations. In this paper, I will present some preliminary findings and reflections based on a small-scale fieldwork carried out in Aarhus (Denmark), where private security guards were hired to patrol a popular public square, primarily to police drug addicts and heavy drinkers. My findings challenge some of the established knowledge and assumptions about the workings of private policing institutions and private security guards. Drawing on the insights that Lipsky (1980) made about the mismatch between the organizational policies of public institutions and of the actual practices of “street-level bureaucrats” who carry out these policies, I suggest that some of the same mechanisms are present in the workings of private policing institutions as well. At the organizational level, private policing organizations might very well only consider narrowly defined goals based on promoting the client’s interests, however, the role of discretion in the workings of the individual private security guards has been underemphasized so far. In this paper, I will present findings that show how private security can develop their own practices, which might be different from the organisational goals of the private policing institutions they are employed by. In addition to this, I will make some methodological notes about the potential of focusing on differences between policing agents, rather than on similarities, which has been the general approach to studying policing, as evident from the vast literature on “police culture”. Instead, I argue for the usefulness of describing practices of individual policing agents in detail, in order to clarify when and how policing is working well and procedurally just as a more effective way of promoting good and just policing.