Reviews

Private Policing

by Mark Button

Cullompton: Willan (2002) ISBN 1 903240 52 2
(155 pages, £16.99)

Reviewed by Joshua Bamfield

Private Policing is one of a small number of key books designed to increase our understanding of the policing work undertaken by a range of organisations other than the UK Home Office police forces.

Mark Button's starting point is the well-accepted idea that 'policing' (defined as 'activities aimed at ensuring the security of a particular social order') cannot be regarded as occurring solely amongst Home Office police forces. Policing has become pluralistic—the number of persons involved in protecting private space and private property through private security now easily exceeds the number of police officers in most Western countries. Button describes the initiatives in many parts of Britain whereby public patrol is provided by private security or voluntary policing arrangements. Respect in Britain for the quality of the police force has not impaired the ability of governments to create at will a range of hybrid police forces (such as the British Transport Police and Ministry of Defence Police) or to hand over certain police-style powers of investigation or arrest to a range of organisations including the Health and Safety Executive, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Department of Health and Social Security (in the investigation of benefit fraud), and trading standards departments in local government. This is a tremendous mix of private hybrids and voluntary agencies.

In Chapter 1, Button provides a new classification of this *mélange* against four main criteria that are thought to underlie the 'publicness' of a policing body. The criteria are: mode of provision (public or private); (sources of) funding; relationship (whether the service is provided as of right or through the market); and status (legal powers). These criteria provide a neat way of analysing the key differences between, say, public police bodies and specialised policing organisations, some of which are firmly located in the private sector with police powers (such as the Port of Tilbury Police) and others in the public domain (such as the Wandsworth Parks Police).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Button discusses the reasons for the growth in private policing. He argues that the most likely reason is the increased demands made upon the public police. Less interesting activities, or those which are non-core but costly, tend to be put out to the private sector, either because the activity is privatised or because it is being left to decline. Pluralist views see power fragmenting, with the private sector requiring adequate policing in mass private spaces such as shopping malls. Thus private policing will inevitably develop further.

Later chapters contain interesting debates about the changing relationship between the private sector and public police, as well as a contribution to the important discussion about 'patrol'. In a stimulating conclusion, Button argues that the main issues for private policing concern: the need for adequate accountability and regulation; the need for co-operation between the different policing organisations and a reduction of variety; and the need for more research in this area.

I would have liked to have seen more comparisons with other countries facing similar problems, and would have appreciated a discussion of views on whether current trends may produce a new para-police security officer, operating either as a full policeman but under a private contract or with a specified support role to public police.

This book is accessible, has much of interest to say to security professionals, academics and police, and the text repays a close reading.

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