

Of 'true professionals' and 'ethical hero warriors': A gender-discourse analysis of private military and security companies

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Abstract

Private military and security companies (PMSCs) have gained increasingly in importance over the course of the past two decades. Yet, given the intransparency of the industry and the heterogeneity of the companies that comprise it, we thus far know little about the actors involved. In this article, we offer preliminary insights into the self-representation of PMSCs, based on a gender-discourse analysis of the homepages of select companies and their main professional associations. We argue that survival in an increasingly competitive industry not only hinges on size, market share or effectiveness, but is also inherently gendered. PMSCs and their associations draw on the one hand on civilized and accepted forms of masculinity and femininity, presenting themselves as 'highly skilled professional' military strategists and ordinary businesses akin to banks or insurance companies. At the same time, however, PMSCs also engage in strategies of (hyper) masculinization and pathologization to set themselves apart from mercenaries, their private competitors and state security forces. In this respect, companies appear to view themselves as 'ethical hero warriors'. Whether intended or not, their strategies have political consequences. Within the security industry, they contribute to the creation and maintenance of a norm regarding what constitutes a legitimate PMSC, to which more or less all companies strive to adhere. Vis-à-vis other security actors, these strategies seek to establish PMSCs as being superior because, unlike these actors, such companies are super-masculine and able to live up to the growing and sometimes contradictory demands of changing security contexts.

Keywords

private military and security companies, privatization, security, masculinities, identity

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Introduction

'Force multipliers' or 'neutral instruments' are terms quite frequently used in policy circles in reference to private military and security companies (PMSCs). Such expressions are at odds with ones more prevalent in the media or some academic writing, where PMSCs are instead predominantly called 'mercenaries' (Fainaru, 2008), 'dogs of war' (Singer, 2004) or 'war profiteers' (Jackson and Grotto, 2008). Rather than being depicted as assisting state militaries to realize security-related goals and concentrate on their core tasks, PMSCs are portrayed as mega-masculine Rambos and trigger-happy brutes. Neither of the two sets of stereotypical categories, however, seems quite fitting. First, both ignore the heterogeneity among companies. Few PMSCs offer just offensive or defensive services; rather, most companies offer a broad range of services, and in addition to governments also work for multinational companies, international organizations and even nongovernmental organizations. Second, externally ascribed dichotomous categories such as these conceal how PMSCs themselves try to influence their own public image, since reputation – according to two representatives of the British Association of Private Security Companies (BAPSC) – is increasingly what 'distinguishes a company in a market that is growing and diversifying' (Bearpark and Schulz, 2007: 240), and hence helps to secure contracts.

A growing number of more recent studies on PMSCs have drawn attention to their political face and how they discursively shape their own public image by presenting themselves as 'legitimate security experts' within the context of neoliberal governmentality (Leander and Van Munster, 2007: 205) or as 'new humanitarians' assisting those in need (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012; see also Carmola, 2010; Berndtsson, 2012). What is missing, however, in most of these studies concerning the self-presentation of PMSCs is an acknowledgement of how this political face is also inherently gendered (for exceptions, see Higate, 2012, forthcoming a, forthcoming b; Chisholm, 2011).

A discourse analysis we conducted of the homepages of 29 select mostly US and UK PMSCs, as well as the publications of two of their professional associations, the International Stability Operations Association (ISOA)¹ and the BAPSC, reveals that the survival of PMSCs not only hinges on their size, market share or effectiveness, but also rests on interrelated strategies of masculinization. To bolster their public image, companies and their associations draw on the one hand on civilized and accepted forms of masculinity and femininity, presenting themselves as 'highly skilled professional' military strategists and ordinary businesses akin to banks or insurance companies. On the other hand, however, PMSCs also engage in strategies of (hyper)masculinization and pathologization to set themselves apart from mercenaries, their private competitors and state security forces. In this respect, companies appear to view themselves as 'ethical hero warriors' and claim to differ from their predecessors and black sheep in the industry on the grounds that they are not only committed to ethical and moral conduct, but also truly concerned about peace as well as order around the globe.

Including gender into the analysis adds to the literature on PMSCs. It offers a different explanation for their ascendancy by drawing attention to their productive power, which not only helps to constitute the multiple and gendered identities of PMSCs, but also contributes to the normalization of private security. In addition, the evidence we present raises questions about existing typologies with respect to PMSCs. The findings suggest that the typologies of the 'true professional' and the 'ethical hero warrior' give rise to what can be viewed as a benchmark masculinity to which PMSCs appear to strive, and this regardless of the services they offer. Irrespective of whether companies offer predominantly what are typically referred to as defensive services, such as logistics or consulting, or offensive combat-related services – which might lead us to expect that they would

exclusively employ language associated with, respectively, the professional or the warrior – they tend to exhibit elements of both masculinities in their online presentations. Furthermore, these two faces of masculinity can equally be found across the US and UK companies in our sample. Drawing on this benchmark masculinity, we argue, is precisely what enables PMSCs to present themselves as normal and legitimate while at the same time distinguishing themselves from other companies in the security industry, as well as the public sector, thus establishing hierarchies. Because it is far from monolithic, this kind of masculinity, and more precisely its constituent parts, allows PMSCs not only to speak to different audiences and attract different groups of clients by emphasizing certain attributes more and others less, but also to establish themselves as new and super-masculine security providers who can deliver the impossible ‘anytime, anywhere’ (EODT, 2010).

The analysis presented in this article also contributes to the literature on gender and security more generally, and scholarly debates regarding military masculinity in particular, which thus far have not addressed the privatization of security or PMSCs. Focusing on state militaries, many scholars have suggested that this kind of masculinity is moving away from the traditional ‘warrior’ type and instead undergoing changes. Precipitated by the end of the Cold War (see, for example, Niva, 1998), the growing involvement in complex peacekeeping missions and state-building more recently, (see, for example, Duncanson, 2009) and technological developments in the military (see, for example, Woodward and Jenkins, 2011), the emerging military masculinity demands of individuals to be warrior, peacekeeper and professional all at the same time. While our analysis supports these findings, we show that PMSCs play an increasingly important role in (re)constituting and (re)defining what military masculinity means, and in so doing they erect new boundaries and blur existing ones. By drawing on models of masculinity that used to be considered hegemonic within Western states and militaries, but that have since become contested, companies permit states and their militaries to incorporate more accepted forms of masculinity and outsource subordinate, but needed, forms. These insights lend force to the arguments of feminist scholars who call for extending our focus from women and femininity to also include men and masculinity, but whose plea is contested. Broadening the perspective is theoretically important because it offers an explanation for how military masculinity can be upheld even in a post-heroic age through primarily adaptation, as well as cooptation, and as a result might offer points for resistance.

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts: We first discuss the concept of masculinity, which we conceive of in the plural, distinguishing between hegemonic and subordinate kinds. We then turn to the results of our discourse analysis of select PMSCs and their associations. Cognizant of the fact that not everything in the discourse of PMSCs is gender(ed), we show, however, that gender – and, more precisely, masculinity – is an important part of the equation explaining the growing acceptance and normalization of PMSCs. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings.

Gender, the construction of masculinities and PMSCs

A gender perspective is particularly suitable for studying the self-representation of PMSCs and their efforts to improve their image because the social construction of identities lies at the very core of such an approach. We draw on the works of masculinity scholars who conceive of masculinity as a socially constructed, plural and fluid concept (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994: 12; Higate and Henry, 2004: 483; Petersen, 2003: 57–8) in order to capture how PMSCs present themselves and set themselves apart from others by discursively assigning gendered meanings.

Presuming that masculinities encompass a range of possible positions, identities or performances (see, for example, Connell, 2000: 21–33) and are shaped by and intersect with other identity-forming categories (Higate and Henry, 2004: 481–98) is ontologically consequential. It ‘enables us to treat masculinity as an important component of complex struggles to define and control individual and collective identities as well as domestic and international political orders’ (Niva, 1998: 111). Thinking of masculinity in the plural moves our focus from men to patterns of gender relations and allows us to examine the hierarchical relations between different masculinities (Hooper, 1998: 35; Kaufman, 1994: 144; Kimmel, 1994; Wadley, 2010: 49). Hegemonic masculinity, for example, ‘is one type of identity construct, at the top of a hierarchy that includes subordinate masculinities and femininities’ (Heeg Maruska, 2010: 238) – though it too relies on other masculinities and, as Charlotte Hooper (1999) illustrates in the case of dominant forms of Anglo-Saxon masculinity, an eclectic mix of competing and partially overlapping and historical archetypes. It includes the citizen/warrior model, the patriarchal Judaeo/Christian model, an aristocratic honour/patronage model and a Protestant bourgeois rationalist model.

Hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinities are expressions of what Michel Foucault has labelled ‘productive power’. In contrast to oppressive power, productive power works through discursive processes and practices that, in turn, assign meanings and produce the identities and subjectivities of social beings (see Foucault, 1971, 1983; but see also Butler, 1990). As Hooper (1998: 34), drawing on R. W. Connell, points out, hegemonic masculinity ‘is achieved largely through an ideological ascendancy over a cultural mix – moral persuasion and consent rather than brute force (although such ascendancy may be backed up by force)’. Productive power establishes boundaries through classification and categorization. It ‘define[s] the (im)possible, the (im)probable, the natural, the normal, what counts as a problem’ (Hayward, 2000: 35), and by so doing contributes to normalization. While not necessarily part of a conscious or deliberate strategy, the valorization of particular masculinities creates a norm or standard to which individuals aspire and through which they can be policed (Hooper, 2001: 30): ‘When men publicly identify with hegemonic masculinity or otherwise collaborate with such public images, they boost their own position’ (Hooper, 1998: 34).

Of the different discursive practices through which hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are constructed, three are of particular interest here: feminization, masculinization and pathologization. *Feminization* involves the assigning of feminine attributes, which are generally assumed to be subordinate to all masculinities, both hegemonic and subordinate (Hooper, 1998: 28–53), such as flexibility, ‘nurturing ... empathy, and compassion’ (Kaufman, 1994: 148). Feminization can be employed to downgrade masculinities. Using examples from the military, quite a number of scholars have illustrated how hegemonic masculinities are constructed when new recruits are downgraded or insulted through being called ‘pussies’ or ‘ninnies’ (Barrett, 2001: 77). However, feminization can also be used to upgrade masculinities. In the case of multinational corporations and, as we will show, in the case of PMSCs, feminine attributes formerly conceived of as being of lesser value are increasingly used to construct acceptable and superior forms of masculinity. Similar to feminization, *masculinization* can be employed as a strategy to affirm superiority, however, by drawing on what are considered accepted and desirable male attributes. Finally, *pathologization* involves the branding of subordinate masculinities as pathological or aberrant. While in the past this has often been accomplished through the projection of effeminacy, subordinate masculinities are, according to Hooper (2001: 74), most often created today ‘through accusations of hypermasculinity’.

Determining whether a certain discourse is indicative of pathologization, masculinization or feminization is not an easy task, because these strategies cannot clearly be separated from each other. Deciding whether a certain attribute is feminine or masculine is equally difficult, as masculinities are both socially constructed and culturally and historically contingent. Nevertheless, for the purpose of our analysis, we treat them as more distinct than perhaps they are, suggesting that proceeding differently would not change our results.

Transnational arenas are sites where hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are constructed (Connell, 2005: 849). Alongside globalization, which scholars have identified as being such a site (see, for example, Kimmel, 2003: 605; Hooper, 2000: 59–73), war is also a place where gendering occurs. It ‘brings into being men and women as particular identities through promoting certain understandings of manhood and womanhood’ (Bethke Elshtain, 1998: 166). The army and the military more generally ‘have long been recognized as important sites for the construction of masculinities’ (Woodward, 2000: 643). In these places, masculinity ‘operates as a kind of intersection of hierarchies, in which a dominant hierarchical distinction between masculine and feminine sustains other hierarchies within and between men and women in different categories of military life’ (Hutchings, 2008: 392), so that some masculinities are more accepted than others (Barrett, 2001). Although often presented as fixed and immutable, ongoing changes in the military masculinities of Western states since the end of the Cold War draw attention to their tentativeness (Duncanson, 2009).

Traditionally, hegemonic military masculinity resembled what Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995) refers to as the ‘just warrior’ model and equates with ‘the brave, physically strong, emotionally tough warrior hero’ (Woodward and Winter, 2004: 289). While this ‘warrior masculinity’ is still present today (Duncanson, 2009: 66), the requirements for soldiers are changing in response to new and different forms of foreign military intervention. Steve Niva (1998: 118), for example, argues that the first Gulf War brought about a ‘new world order’ masculinity, a ‘refurbished American manhood’ characterized by a ‘slight feminization through the construction of a tough and aggressive, yet tenderhearted, masculinity’. ‘Rather than bravado or stern invincibility’, it admitted ‘manly vulnerability and human compassion’. More recent studies suggest that being a soldier involves more ‘than ever before ... non-combat skills’ (Duncanson, 2009: 66). According to Claire Duncanson (2009: 70), for example, the participation of militaries in increasingly complex peacekeeping missions has given rise to a ‘peacekeeping masculinity’, which is constructed through feminization and the linkage of ‘the everyday practices of peacekeeping such as building friendships, drinking coffee and chatting ... to bravery and effective soldiering’. Further changes in military masculinity have been induced by the so-called revolution in military affairs, with ‘a move towards “smarter” armed forces, equipped with technologically sophisticated weapons and intelligence systems’ (Woodward and Winter, 2004: 295). As a result, ‘the possession of professional skills and expertise [became] a marker of military identity’ (Woodward and Jenkins, 2011: 258), reinforced by an increased reference to corporate approaches within the context of the global economy and a more general reshaping of masculinity based on ‘managerial heroism, and transnational business masculinity’ (Scott, 2006: 99).

Taken together, these recent developments ask today’s soldiers to be not just warriors but also managers and peacekeepers, and to be tough, rational and tender all at the same time. This emerging hegemonic military masculinity is not only demanding but also characterized by tensions between its constituent elements, especially between the traditional ‘“warrior” combat leader’ on the one hand and the ‘rational manager’ (Nuciari, 2006: 68) and the ‘peacekeeper’ on the other, as complex operations such as those in Iraq or Afghanistan illustrate: ‘soldiers are expected to win

hearts and minds, create peace and security, yet [are] also [required to] use their combat skills' (Duncanson, 2009: 76). Because these masculinities require an unprecedented degree of flexibility, Sabine Mannitz (2011: 690) refers to them as 'hybridity' and points to the 'multifacetedness of contemporary soldiering between military and civilian tasks'. They also give meaning to the outsourcing of military and police-related tasks to PMSCs, which, according to Catherine V. Scott (2006: 100), 'is compatible with neo-liberal globalization and with self-images of cost-effective managers battling terrorist threats'.

We push Scott's argument further, suggesting that enlisting PMSCs is not only in line with the self-understanding of Western state militaries, but also allows them to live up to and reduce the tensions between conflicting demands of multiple masculinities. When state militaries, for example, have to be peacekeepers, and hence become feminized, PMSCs can perform the warrior masculinity role. PMSCs, in other words, represent the different 'other' against which the rational manager and the tender peacekeeper can be constructed, just as the tough warrior has traditionally been constructed against the feminine other – that is, the 'beautiful soul' (Bethke Elshain, 1995) that had to be protected or the prostitute, which allowed men 'to "other" women and understand themselves as masculine' (Jeffreys, 2007: 18). In the light of ongoing changes, private companies make it possible for state militaries to claim socially accepted forms of masculinities for themselves and to outsource less accepted ones to the private sector. PMSCs do not, however, adopt these masculinities passively. Instead, as we will show, they redefine and turn them into acceptable hegemonic masculinities through discursive practices aimed at demonstrating that they are 'normal' security actors. The homepages of companies are illustrative in this respect.

Such homepages are instruments through which PMSCs can shape and influence their public image. As Craig Warkentin (2001: 36–7) has shown with respect to NGOs, by 'creating an online persona', actors 'engage in framing activities ... shaping the ways that issues are conceptualized and understood'. In the case of PMSCs, such homepages not only offer insights into how companies distinguish themselves from other security providers, but, owing to the often transnational character of most such companies, are also important sources of information for their clients and potential employees. For the purposes of our analysis, we selected a broad and representative sample of 29 companies that exemplify the whole spectrum: companies offering diverse services, companies working for different clients, and companies adopting various practices and policies. The sample comprises the following companies: Aegis, AKE, ASI Group (now part of FrontierMEDEX), Assured Risks, BH Defense, Blackwater (now Academi), Blue Hackle, Cochise Consultancy, Control Risks, Defensesecurity, Double-Eagle Management, DynCorp, Edinburgh International, EODT, EUBSA, FSI Worldwide, G4S, Mission Essential Personnel (MEP), L3-MPRI, Olive Group, Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE), Pistris, REDfour, SCG International, Sharp End International, SOC, Tactical Solutions International, Threat Management Group and Triple Canopy. In addition to these companies' homepages, we analysed the publications of the two major industry associations – the ISOA and the BAPSC – and their representatives.

When analysing these companies' pages, we paid attention both to written text and to images, including photos and symbols. Since the sample consists primarily of PMSCs based in the USA and the UK, which are currently the biggest markets, we searched for elements indicative of 'modern "Western" forms of masculinity' (Carver, 2008: 71), equating references to professionalism, expertise, technology or integrity with masculinization, and ones to, for example, diversity, empathy and compassion with feminization. It seemed secondary to our argument whether the ways in which PMSCs conceive of themselves match the ways in which they present themselves or whether their self-presentations are nothing but marketing. The central claim is that more or less all PMSCs

present themselves in a similar fashion and that they do so because they consider it advantageous to their business. Moreover, cognizant of the fact that these companies' homepages may have been designed with a range of different intentions in mind and also contain non-gendered language, we nevertheless assume that they exist within a broader context. Their authors, consciously or otherwise, draw on and their readers associate them with various shared meanings, including gendered ones (Hooper, 2001: 122–3).

PMSCs and the construction of masculinities

PMSCs actively shape the demand for their services. They seek to rid themselves of the mercenary image by replacing the negative, subordinate forms of masculinity associated with that image with more accepted forms. Most of the companies we analysed present themselves on the one hand as highly trained professionals and on the other as ethical hero warriors. While, in the case of the former, they make themselves look like accountable and respectable businesses akin to banks or insurance companies, upgrading in the latter is accomplished by downgrading other security providers, such as conventional armies and international organizations. Both types of masculinities have in common that they are far from monolithic. They are complex, made up of both masculine and feminine attributes, and interdependent. Reflective of existing contradictions and tensions within the industry, the ambivalent character of these two kinds of masculinities is precisely, we would argue, what allows PMSCs to portray themselves as unique and superior security providers.

Highly trained professionals

PMSCs conceive of themselves as highly trained professionals who possess exceptional technocratic expertise, excellent personnel, versatility and flexibility. From this perspective, the respective companies no longer appear as unaccountable and out of control, but rather as regular, serious business partners selling services just like any other corporate service provider. This applies to companies across the spectrum, whether they offer combat-related services or not.

Similar to the British PMSC Olive Group, a 'global provider of integrated risk mitigation solutions' (Olive Group, 2012) that claims that 'our people, internal processes, and quality of services are the best in the industry' (Olive Group, 2010a), the US-based company L3-MPRI (2010), which specializes in training, claims to have the 'highest quality people producing the highest quality results'. PMSCs that engage in combat activities – such as Tactical Solutions International (2012), which offers, among other things, 'Combat Search, Rescue and Recovery' – use almost identical language. The latter company refers to its employees as 'the true "Silent Professionals"' (see also Double-Eagle Management, 2010; MEP, 2011; SCG International, 2010). Phrases such as these are accompanied by photographs showing men wearing black suits, sitting in front of computers (Olive Group, 2011) or around tables (ASI Group, 2011; Edinburgh International, 2011), absorbed and engaged in discussions. Both the language and the images used fit with what Hooper (2001: 98) refers to as the bourgeois-rationalist model of masculinity, which 'idealizes competitive individualism, reason, and self-control' and values 'superior intellect and personal integrity ... over physical strength'. In the case of PMSCs, though, this version of masculinity often has imperial overtones.

Regardless of whether PMSCs are 'the world's largest' (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011: 1), such as G4S, or smaller ones offering offensive combat services, such as EUBSA and SCG International, they all maintain that they offer the 'best possible security on any scale, anywhere in

the world!’ (EUBSA, 2010), at ‘any place on earth’ (SCG International, 2012), ‘any time, anywhere’ (BH Defense, 2010; DynCorp, 2010; EODT, 2010), ‘even in the most hazardous situations’ (G4S, 2009). Compared to other security providers, they claim, like DynCorp (2010), to be in the exceptional position of being able to ‘meet the complex demands of today’s world’ or, like G4S (2010), to be ‘the global leader in full-service security management’ (see also SOC, 2010). Catchwords such as ‘mission critical’, ‘maximum effort’, ‘on time’, ‘fully committed’, ‘in tune’ and ‘par excellence’, as used by the company Double-Eagle Management (2010) to describe what it is about, are very common within the advertisements we analysed. They suggest perfection and confidence, attributes that also have been associated with the bourgeois-rationalist model and that, according to Anna Leander and Rens van Munster, resonate with the ‘neo-liberal governmentality’ characteristic of security nowadays that ‘constitute[s] contractors as a caste of new security experts’ (Leander and Van Munster, 2007: 202, 206). The statements of PMSCs, however, are also indicative of the professed changes of the bourgeois-rationalist model.

On the one hand, they lend force to the arguments of scholars like Frank J. Barrett, according to whom ‘the advent of new technology has produced a new kind of masculinity, the professionalized calculative rationality’ (Barrett, 2001: 92; see also Hooper, 2001: 152). PMSCs pride themselves on having the best equipment. Double-Eagle Management (2010), for example, considers its most valuable assets to be ‘cutting edge technology’, ‘advanced logistics and distribution’, as well as ‘premium products and services’ (see also ASI Group, 2010). Similarly, BH Defense (2009) guarantees reliability because it uses ‘Panasonic Toughbooks 30’, which are ‘tougher than tough’ – they are ‘powerful, rugged and wireless’. The claim that PMSCs possess outstanding technical expertise is also communicated through images. Incidentally, the homepages of Olive Group (2012), Edinburgh International (2012) and Assured Risks (2012) all show exactly the same picture: a man with a headset. Hence, resemblance among companies is produced not only through discourses but also visually. In addition to the ‘professionalized calculative rationality’ (Barrett, 2001: 92), the advertisements of PMSCs also indicate that military masculinity is softening. They lend force to the claims of R. W. Connell, who finds that traits typically associated with femininity are now ‘being marketed as macho power machines’ (Connell cited in Hooper, 2001: 156).

Many companies, even ones offering offensive services, assert their professed expertise on the basis of a set of attributes that includes experience, flexibility and cultural sensitivity, and, like Assured Risks (2010), consider these essential assets for survival and success. Most PMSCs, whether based in the USA or the UK and irrespective of whether they offer consulting or engage in combat activities or both, claim to ‘have had recent, real-world experience in virtually every combat theater or hotspot on the globe’ (Tactical Solutions International, 2012; see also SCG International, 2012; Sharp End International, 2010; Aegis, 2010a; DynCorp, 2010; Blackwater, 2008; Control Risks, 2010), and that this, together with their ‘understanding of local customs’ (REDfour, 2009; see also AKE, 2010; ASI Group, 2010), means that they ‘can tailor any requirement, in any environment to meet the needs of those who require [their] services’ (Tactical Solutions International, 2012; see also SOC, 2009; DynCorp, 2012; L3-MPRI, 2012). Hence, SCG International (2012) prides itself on having ‘the most highly skilled security professionals available today’, who ‘are as comfortable at the Bellagio as in the back of a CH-47’. By appropriating feminine attributes and turning them into valuable masculine traits, PMSCs set themselves apart from other security providers, which, according to Sharp End International (2010), ‘provide unskilled instruction, by personnel who have no relevant experience and who are unaccustomed to working with different dialects, languages or cultures’. At the same time, while the companies’ homepages are reflective of the softening of masculinities, they also point to tensions and contradictions within

the industry. References to feminine attributes are frequently accompanied by pictures of heavily armed men in combat gear (see, for example, Sharp End International, 2010).

When reading through the advertisements of PMSCs, one might be reminded of the idea of a selfless caretaker. The company ASI Group (2009), for example, promises to be 'there for you – around the world, around the clock. That is the ASI Group difference'. Cochise Consultancy (2009) provides 'world wide security for all your needs. We are here to take care of you every minute'. PAE (2011) has 'the capacity of care', is 'there when you need us' and 'ready at a moment's notice', while AKE (2010) will 'give the client peace of mind'. Most companies stress that they are willing to subordinate their own interests to those of their clients. In this respect, Olive Group (2010a) considers its clients' interests to be the overriding concern, 'before all else, including our commercial gain'. Although statements such as those of Aegis (2010a) – a company that ensures that its clients, 'whether government or commercial, are able to concentrate on their primary objectives' (see also Threat Management Group, 2010; SCG International, 2010; AKE, 2010) – correspond to the image of PMSCs as 'force multipliers' prevalent in policy circles, most companies conceive of themselves in a much more encompassing masculinized fashion.

The majority of the homepages we examined convey the impression that the respective company is omnipotent and that its capacities are unlimited. BH Defense (2010), for example, promises 'total risk mitigation, security, and logistic support to government, non-government, and commercial organizations in conflict areas or developing countries'. The company refers to itself as a 'one stop shop' for solutions to problems facing its clients in difficult places, similar to Aegis, which offers 'comprehensive advice on every aspect of security' (Aegis, 2010a; see also EODT, 2010; SCG International, 2010; Olive Group, 2010a). Advertisements such as these suggest not only that potential clients can always rely on PMSCs, but also that PMSCs are the only ones on whom clients can rely. They can, so they state, provide comprehensive security and ultimate protection.

On the whole, the image of the highly trained professional fits with the rationalist protector masculinity that, according to Jonathan Wadley (2010: 50–1), 'has achieved dominant, if not hegemonic, status'. While this form of masculinity has helped states gain legitimacy, it is now copied and even upgraded by PMSCs, who declare themselves to be the best rationalist protectors, regardless of the services they provide. Similar to Olive Group (2012), which claims that clients turn to its company 'when it really matters', SCG International (2010) asserts: 'In times of trouble, when the risk is too great and you find yourself asking, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" There is only one answer – send SCG International.' Statements such as these mask, however, the complex social realities of private security services and conceal the fact that hegemonic-type masculinities require subordinate ones. Privatization of security is accompanied by exploitation and marginalization of men. Although the mostly male staffs of PMSCs are often presented as exceptional and well-trained experts, they do not enjoy the same labour rights and social security cover as the personnel of regular Western armed forces. Instead of being given long-term contracts, they are often hired as contractors for single missions that frequently last only a few months. Quite a number of companies – especially those that carry out logistics and other support activities – also recruit host-country or third-country nationals because they are cheap labour (Chatterjee, 2006, 2009: 19–20). Practices such as these highlight the ways in which the masculinities shaped by PMSCs intersect with race, culture and class. Although the companies we examined claim that their personnel belong to an elite that consists of former members of Western militaries, they profit from and reproduce social inequalities, not just within the companies themselves but also through the feminization and subordination of other security providers.

Ethical hero warriors

In addition to that of the highly trained professional, PMSCs contribute to the construction of the ethical hero warrior masculinity through their discourses. While there is some overlap between the two types of masculinity in terms of their constituent elements and the strategies through which they are asserted, there are nevertheless a number of important differences. First, the ethical hero warrior version of masculinity resembles the honour/patronage model and values ‘personal bonds between men, military heroism, and taking risks’ (Hooper, 2001: 65). Second, in contrast to the situation with the highly trained professional model of masculinity, where hegemony is established by drawing on accepted forms of masculinity and femininity, superiority in this second case is also accomplished through devaluation and pathologization of the masculinity of other security actors, first and foremost that of governments and mercenaries. Third, and relatedly, the ethical hero warrior masculinity neither fits with the image of conventional corporate service providers akin to banks or insurance companies that is transported through the professional security expert nor corresponds to the Rambo image that dominates the media coverage. Instead, this kind of masculinity likens PMSCs to humanitarian NGOs and missionaries, and this may be a reason why we find references to it, though in varying degrees, among companies that explicitly mention that they offer combat-related services (e.g. EUBSA, Tactical Solutions International or Sharp End International) as well as ones specializing in training (e.g. L3-MPRI) or more defensive security services, such as consultancy and risk management (e.g. G4S, Olive Group, MEP).

Many PMSCs claim, like DynCorp and L3-MPRI or their association the ISOA, to ‘serve to make the world a safer place’ (DynCorp, 2010) and to ‘help create a safer, healthier and more prosperous world’ (L3-MPRI, 2009; see also IPOA, 2010; G4S, 2010; EODT, 2010; MEP, 2011). Their homepages show sad-looking children (EODT, 2008; JIPO, 2008b: 1), babies being fed (Blackwater, 2006), boys laughing and waving at the camera (Blackwater, 2007), or a globe (JIPO, 2008a: 1) – images that have feminine connotations, such as peace, Mother Earth and children, and that convey that PMSCs can be trusted. However, at the same time as feminine attributes are used to construct and bolster the ethical hero warrior masculinity, they also are employed to downgrade other security actors, particularly states.

While the ISOA is probably the most aggressive in this respect, the rhetoric it uses is not uncommon (see, for example, Pistris, 2011; G4S, 2011). Unlike governments and their military forces, which ‘too often [have] been absent from critical humanitarian missions, the private sector’, in the eyes of the president of the ISOA, ‘has always been willing to step up to the plate to provide critical services, even in some remarkably risky operations’ (Brooks, 2004). Recalling that ‘the clock is ticking’ (Schenkel, 2006: 8), representatives of the IPOA/ISOA describe the reluctance of Western countries to send troops for peacekeeping missions as ‘irrational’ (Messner, 2008: 24), and as both a threat to peace and a ‘death sentence for millions’ (Brooks, 2009: 19–20). However, at the same time as PMSCs call into question the masculinity of other security providers, they also draw on it to enhance their own legitimacy and reputation.

Whether from the USA or the UK and regardless of the services they offer, PMSCs pride themselves on the fact that their staffs are composed of former governmental employees. Assured Risks (2010), for example, refers to itself as a security specialist whose ‘security consultants are the very best in the market’ and claims that it recruits ‘only former members of the UK Special Forces, Royal Marine Commandos and the UK security services’ (Assured Risks, 2011; see also Blue Hackle, 2011; Olive Group, 2012; Tactical Solutions International, 2012). EUBSA (2010) explains that its ‘Emergency Rescue Teams ... are being trained like US DELTA or the British SAS in the way that they receive special forces training for special duties operations on land, in air and sea’.

Quite a number of scholars have argued that these recruitment practices contribute to a blurring of boundaries between the public and private and a perception among policymakers that PMSCs are quasi-state actors (see, for example, Berndtsson, 2012). Our analysis, however, makes apparent that the shifting of boundaries has yet another source, one that is potentially more far-reaching: the ethical hero masculinity of PMSCs, which they construct by simultaneously drawing on what they consider valuable aspects of states' masculinity and degrading others. Accordingly, the relationship between PMSCs and mercenaries is just as ambivalent as that between the companies and states.

According to Anna Leander (2009: 10), 'companies, the professional associations tied to them, as well as self-selected advocates have gone to considerable lengths to explain that the current market is not simply mercenarism 2.0 and that the contemporary contractors are more like "messiahs than mercenaries"'. We also found evidence of this. J. J. Messner (2007: 24), a former director of the IPOA, insists that calling PMSCs 'war profiteers' who are interested in prolonging wars is 'akin to describing hospitals as "sickness profiteers"', while the Special Tactics and Operations (STOP) units of EUBSA (2010) call themselves 'true soldiers – not adventurers or "mercs"'. The company stresses that

We don't regard our staff as 'mercs' that can be exploited and 'burned'. We are looking for highly skilled soldiers to begin with. They will be trained in all necessary [sic] aspects. THAT means: they must be WILLING to learn, to accept new ways, lear [sic] new subjects. It's NOT all about gun slinging, gung-ho macho stuff and the like. Granted, we still ARE soldiers ... but we are professional modern PRIVATE soldiers. That means, we DO know about the needs of our clients, about running a company, about politics and about all those complex issues of the modern world.

Mercenaries are portrayed as the deviant other, the hyper-masculine Rambo types, in contrast to PMSCs, which conceive of themselves as 'competent, loyal and professional warriors' (EUBSA, 2010).

PMSCs set themselves apart by asserting ethical and moral superiority. Many companies, no matter what market segment they belong to or which country they are based in, declare like DynCorp (2010) that they 'Do the Right Thing – always, for [their] customers, employees, and those [they] serve' (see also G4S, 2010; Tactical Solutions International, 2012; AKE, 2010), and that they are delivering their services 'with the highest professional and ethical standards' (Threat Management Group, 2010; Aegis, 2010a; Olive Group, 2010a; SCG International, 2010; Double-Eagle Management, 2009) or engage in 'unquestionable ethical behavior' (Olive Group, 2010b). They bolster their masculinity also through various practices. Quite a few companies, such as Aegis (2010b: 4) and FSI Worldwide (2010), have established their own charities, while Triple Canopy (2010) and Olive Group (2010a) engage in charitable activities. In addition, many PMSCs have established codes of conduct or subscribe, if they are a member, to those of the ISOA.

Although the practices and discourses of the companies we analysed are reflective of the new corporate (feminized) masculinity of highly trained professionals, they also exhibit elements of the traditional hero warrior masculinity even when the companies do not offer combat-related services. For example, Mission Essential Personnel (2011), which provides mostly defensive services, asserts that 'our honor is beyond reproach'. Its language is nearly identical to that of EUBSA (2010), which does provide combat services, considers it an 'honor' for individuals to become members of its rescue teams, and expects absolute secrecy from them about the kind of employment in which they are engaged. Similarly, the code of honour of Defensecurity (2010), a company specializing in risk management, training and protection, reminds its staff members that they are

'proud', 'professionals' and 'élite volunteer[s]', while at the same time asking them to consider each other as 'brothers' bound together through the solidarity that joins the members of a family. They should 'serve the client with honor and faithfulness', 'respect [sic] traditions ... be loyal to [their] leaders', and demonstrate their 'virtues' through 'discipline, esprit de corps, strength and bravery'. Although encouraging employees to express their astuteness, the code also calls on them to behave in a 'dignified' and 'modest' way. Statements such as these lend force to the argument of David H. J. Morgan (1994: 165) that

Despite far-reaching political, social, and technological change, the warrior still seems to be a key symbol of masculinity.... The stance, the facial expressions, and the weapons clearly connote aggression, courage, a capacity for violence, and, sometimes, a willingness for sacrifice.

While few companies refer to themselves explicitly as 'warriors' – as EUBSA's Emergency Rescue Teams (ERTs) or Defensesecurity do – many websites contain photos of 'tough guys' with shaved heads, dressed in combat gear and wearing sunglasses (e.g. Cochise Consultancy, 2011; Sharp End International, 2010), carrying arms (e.g. L3-MPRI, 2012; DynCorp, 2012; Triple Canopy, 2012), and sometimes even in shooting positions (e.g. DynCorp, 2012). At the same time as the discourses of PMSCs contain traces of warrior masculinity, some of them also give reason to doubt whether the respective companies are so different from the mercenaries from whom the companies try to set themselves apart. The code of honour of Defensesecurity (2010), for example, asks company members to consider every 'mission [as] holy' and to 'complete it at the cost of death', and when they fight to adhere to the following principles: 'no passion and no anger, respect of the beaten enemy, never abandon your deads [sic], your wounded [sic] and your arms'. And the motto of EUBSA's ERT teams is 'Fidelitas Mandatorius', which 'expresses that we will be 100% loyal to our clients! Like old-time Samurais, we'll step in as rescue teams to protect the client's interests in places where no-one else will do so or dare go in' and be 'will[ing] to attack seemingly secured premises with extreme means in order to test the security' (EUBSA, 2010). EUBSA's logo is a charging lion, which, according to the company's homepage, is both related to the first name of its founder 'Ariel (Arik) Brillstein – Ariel = God's lion' and used 'as symbol for King David and his decendants [sic], members of the Judah tribe' (EUBSA, 2010). Although not representative of other companies in our sample, EUBSA's statements suggest that PMSCs conceive of themselves as more than just service providers, a suspicion that appears to be affirmed by the ISOA and its president, Doug Brooks, who gave as the title for an article he wrote on the future of international private military services the question 'Messiahs or Mercenaries?' The answer seemed clear to him. Reputable PMSCs are the former. They are guided by 'ethics and humanitarianism' (Brooks, 2000: 141).

Conclusion and discussion

Analysing the privatization of security from a gender perspective contributes to a better understanding of the political face of private military and security companies. It not only focuses our attention on discursive strategies of masculinization, but also highlights problems associated with commonly used classifications based on the services that PMSCs offer. Confronted with a growing number of competitors, scandals involving the employees of PMSCs in conflict zones and negative press coverage, companies promote their own image by presenting themselves as both 'highly trained professionals' and 'ethical hero warriors'. These two masculinities and the tensions that exist between them allow PMSCs individually and the industry as a whole not only to position themselves both as normal and yet different security providers, but also to offer their clients suitable arguments to justify the privatization of security.

Within the security industry, the tropes of the true professional and the ethical hero warrior establish a 'hegemonic masculinity' – a norm for how a 'normal' PMSC should look – and contribute to an alignment within the industry. Independently of the kinds of services they offered or where they were based, almost all the companies we analysed exhibited aspects of this constructed benchmark masculinity. Relying on similar discourses and images, they, on the one hand, portray themselves as superior, omnipotent and invincible and, on the other, devalue the masculinity of other security actors, such as conventional military forces, mercenaries and even other PMSCs, by depicting them as weak, incapable, ineffective and immoral. At the same time as these masculinities contribute to sameness, they nevertheless allow for differentiation between companies that exhibit aspects of the true professional or the ethical hero warrior to varying degrees. Since these differences are, however, not always obvious, we need to problematize masculinities and the discourses through which they are constructed. By including them into our analysis of PMSCs, we not only obtain a more comprehensive understanding as to why privatization of security is increasingly perceived as 'normal', but also gain insights as to why hegemonic masculinity, which companies construct in the process, may be difficult to resist and dismantle.

Companies claim that they, unlike others, can do the impossible. Compared to mercenaries, they claim to provide security in a professional, ethical manner and to care about the world rather than profits. Unlike states, PMSCs pride themselves on being able to offer all-encompassing protection and on having the resolve to go anywhere, at anytime, whatever the risks entailed. The boundaries that are established discursively, however, as we illustrated above, are far from rigid or coherent. As much as PMSCs are interested in differentiation and presenting themselves as superior, it is also essential for them to maintain relations with other security providers. Both for the sake of their reputation and to sell services, it is important for companies to seek an association with states or international organizations and to portray themselves as highly trained professionals akin to insurance firms or banks. But, to actually get hired and as far as recruitment is concerned, it is also necessary for PMSCs to emphasize what makes them unique and sets them apart from regular businesses. Were they identical, they would most probably not win contracts from governments or international (non)governmental organizations, nor would they be able to recruit adequate staff without simultaneously stressing that they look for the best and the world's foremost professionals and alluding to adventure, heroism and bravery.

The ambivalences, interdependencies and tensions are what make the true professional and ethical hero warrior masculinities so powerful. PMSCs present themselves in a multi-perspectival manner and adjust seamlessly to their clients' needs. In comparison to other security actors, they can be super-masculine: a hired gun, a professional, a warrior and a peacekeeper, all at the same time. Unlike states and their militaries or mercenaries, they are not socially or historically limited to certain kinds of masculinities and are therefore in a position to live up to the demands of changing security contexts. Seen this way, PMSCs derive their growing importance not solely from being effective force multipliers, but also because they are effective masculinity multipliers.

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Note

1 Prior to autumn 2010, the ISOA was known as the International Peace Operations Association (IPOA).

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