

Book Reviews**The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security**

Deborah D. Avant

*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, €30.99, 324pp.**ISBN: 13 978-0-521-61535-8**Journal of International Relations and Development* (2008) **11**, 75–77.

doi:10.1057/jird.2008.3

Since the end of the cold war the ‘who is who’ in military and security affairs has evolved very rapidly. Private actors of various stamps have come to occupy increasingly prominent positions. In some cases their presence is considered illegitimate by most observers, as, for example, is the case with ‘terrorist’ organizations. In others, their role is not only considered legitimate but results from public policies, as is the case with most security contractors working in Iraq. Avant’s book deals primarily with the latter situation. More specifically, as the book title signals, Avant probes the consequences of the ‘market for force’. As this review will underline she does so in an interesting and thorough way, yet somewhat paradoxically Avant understates her own contribution to the ongoing discussions by not placing the ‘big’ points of her study at the fore and instead insisting on the immediate complexities and dilemmas a variety of agents face in the market for force.

Avant’s book is structured to provide a precise and detailed discussion of how the development of a private market for force impacts on state control over the use of force. The book strongly emphasizes that this is less straightforward than usually assumed and that there are two sides to a coin. This approach is not only comprehensible in a context where discussions are fraught with unfounded generalizations supporting ‘pessimistic’ or ‘optimistic’ views (as Avant terms the positions her book is up against). It is a relief. Indeed, this book is a model of a serious study. It disentangles the notion of control into three distinct subcategories (a functional, a political and a social category) derived from existing bodies of literature on the issue. It uses these notions to derive hypothesis about what effects we should expect to see in weak and strong states, respectively. It then proceeds to look at how these hypotheses are born out in three different situations: (1) the situation where states contract military services (mainly looked at through contracting by the US, by Croatia and by Sierra Leone); (2) the situation where states export military services (mainly exports by the US, the UK and South Africa) and cases where private actors finance military services (the case of Shell in Nigeria, of the International non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) in Goma and the Conservation INGOs in the Garamba parc).

The overarching idea is that the extent to which state control over the use of force will be strengthened or weakened depends on the degree of fit between the existing control mechanisms and the changes provoked as well as on the co-variation in the three dimensions of control. The conclusion is that in most cases there is neither fit, nor co-variation. Consequently, ‘the market for force has undermined states’ collective ability to monopolize violence in the international system’ (p. 264). The exception to this general rule is the effect



of MPRI¹ on the Croatian state's control over the use of force that Avant reads as enhancing on all fronts. This sounds as if it would pave the way for a fairly straightforward conclusion that (as Avant rightly points out) implies neither a pessimistic anarchy vision of the future nor that states are obsolete and unimportant. We are talking about a change in one of the primary institutions of international life; 'sovereignty': a shift in the way that the use of force is controlled (Buzan 2004; Holsti 2004). Avant has documented this shift in admirable detail and in her book, she makes a number of important points about its implications. Yet, instead of drawing these points to the fore Avant suggests that,

Increases in the market allocation of violence have had serious consequences for politics and political order in the past and promise to have similarly serious consequences in the future. Rather than arguing about its overall costs or benefits, both policy makers and their constituents would be well served by thinking about the trade-offs involved in the different strategies for participating in and managing this market (p. 264).

This concluding statement is characteristic of a tension that runs through the entire book: on the one hand Avant identifies profound and profoundly important long-term changes, on the other, she shies away from a discussion of their implications. Instead, she prefers to direct attention to the 'dilemmas' and 'trade-offs' facing actors when they make choices in a market assumed to be given. But in good old Giddensian structurationist fashion, the two things are not separable. Clearly, the immediate trade-offs and possible strategies are given by the structure of the market and actors' understanding of it. Actor choices and strategies in turn shape the structure of the market and hence future trade-offs and possible strategies. Actors therefore *cannot* simply neglect overall costs and benefits when they struggle with trade-offs and device strategies. On the contrary, they are bound to be profoundly interested in the more long-term issues. In fact, many would probably be more interested an analysis of these than they are in being told that they should think about the trade-offs and strategies for participating and managing a market taken for granted. They already do. It is therefore a pity that Avant's does not emphasize the points her analysis contains about the overall costs and benefits of the market. Two examples of such points will wrap up this review.

First, Avant makes an important point about the evolving nature of military 'professionalism'. Professionalism plays a central role in Avant's account because her understanding of the 'social' control over the use of force is articulated as a study of 'professionalism'. Based on her reading of sociological institutionalism one of Avant's central hypotheses is that privatization should leave unaltered (or increase) the fit between the values reflected among security professionals and that of states. Concretely, this hypothesis is pursued by looking at the degree to which private markets spread military 'professionalism' reflecting an ethos of upholding the laws of war and human rights. The hypothesis does not stand scrutiny. Avant persuasively shows that the market commercializes the military at least as much as it imbues private market actors with a 'professional' ethos. In some cases (Avant gives the example of Ageis in Iraq) the market actor is chosen precisely because it makes it possible to circumvent conventional military 'professionalism'. The consequence, Avant points out, is that while 'military professionalism has been dominated by military organizations and academies in the



public sector and aimed at public service. The increasing use of Private Security Companies (PSCs), however, is changing that practice and opening the way for private military professionals' (p. 157). This is a profound long-term change of what professionalism is. It is a change driven by the growth of the market where the sum is bigger than the aggregation of the parts. It is a change governments, firms, INGOs and armed forces will certainly wish to consider when they contemplate 'strategies' for engaging in the market but which is difficult to capture in a discussion that excludes overall costs and benefits.

Second, Avant makes a very interesting point about the effect of the market on the nature of and weight of security institutions. She argues that not only does it alter the immediate control of institutions, 'contracting also shifts the sand on which existing institutions were built' (p. 63). This general insight transpires most of Avant's discussions. Avant shows that the market alters the role institutions have in setting security agendas. She argues that by its restrictive approach to the export of military services South Africa (unlike, the US and the UK) 'has maintained *political* control over violence. It has reduced the opportunities of PSCs to affect government policy or preferences in South Africa' (p. 167). She further shows that the market alters who can mediate and control conflicts. At the international level, Avant argues that 'to the extent that PSCs compete with and undermine the importance of multi-lateral institutions, the effect is to remove one of the more important ways in which political and social control over violence can be coordinated' (p. 240). Finally, at the heart of her discussion of the role of private actors in financing security services is the idea that we are seeing the emergence of new arrangements for governing security, even if her study paints a dim picture of the costs entailed by such change. The situations where private actors (INGOs and corporations) take over financing and control have resulted in increased violence and diminished professionalism. This kind of institutional change is not only who controls the use of force but also in who sets the security agenda and how conflicts can be mediated and by whom are of pivotal interest to anyone thinking about the market for force and international relations in general.

It is precisely because Avant's book says much about overall shifts in world politics (even it does so in spite itself) that is a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in international relations.

Anna Leander

Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Note

1 MPRI (Military Professional Resources Inc.) is a major US firm with close links to the public security establishment.

References

- Buzan, Barry (2004) *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holsti, Kalevi J. (2004) *Taming the Sovereigns: Institutional Change in International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.