

Private military and security companies' logos: Between camouflaging and corporate socialization

Security Dialogue

1–21

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DOI: 10.1177/0967010620923586

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Abstract

International relations scholarship has paid insufficient attention to security providers' tendency to emulate the visual attributes of other actors in an attempt to (re)construct their identities and increase their legitimacy by signalling adherence to prevailing norms. Research on the discourses deployed by private military and security companies (PMSCs), for instance, has relied almost exclusively on the analysis of written documents. This article argues that even basic visual units like logos serve as windows into the genealogy and evolution of the international market for force. By combining insights from Peircean semiotics and institutionalist theory, I show that PMSCs' logos are not only marketing tools, but also symbolic acts that shed light upon the shifting identities and legitimization strategies of the international private security industry. Specifically, I argue that PMSCs' logos can be conceptualized as forms of camouflaging, blame-shifting, mirroring and socialization into corporate identities. These overlapping processes have reshaped the international private security industry brandscape, informing a shift away from the use of logos displaying symbols and colours borrowed from military visual identity systems.

Keywords

Institutional isomorphism, logos, marketing semiotics, PMSCs, private security, visual securitization

Introduction

International relations has dedicated growing attention to visuality. Since Williams's (2003) call for expanding the study of securitization beyond written texts, scholars have extensively examined how images 'speak security' (Hansen, 2011: 51). Visual securitization researchers have investigated how images become securitized as representations of referent objects, as in the case of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad (Hansen, 2011), and highlighted the securitizing power

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of visual artefacts like the *Time* magazine cover showing a tortured Afghan woman (Heck and Schlag, 2013) or *the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*' Doomsday Clock (Vuori, 2010). While this trailblazing scholarship has heralded security studies' visual turn, images do not only securitize or become securitized, but participate in the visual construction of security in a broader way. Accordingly, recent studies have examined the connection between visibility and emotions (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020); investigated the role of maps, satellite images and comic books as narrative sites of (geo)politics (Shim, 2017); and stressed the importance of colours as meaning-making tools that shape social imaginaries (Andersen et al., 2015; Guillaume et al., 2016). The visual dimension of security providers' legitimization strategies and identity-formation processes, however, has remained unexplored.

Institutionalist scholars have long noted that organizations operating in the same field often develop similar structures, converging in a process of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 149). The tendency of organizations to mimic each other does not simply derive from functional considerations, but is primarily an attempt to achieve legitimacy by showing conformity with prevailing norms (March and Olsen, 1989). As norm adherence is both objective and symbolic, visual artefacts have 'as much role in legitimizing an organization as do tangible, specific deeds' (Arnold et al., 2001: 245). Yet international relations scholars have dedicated scant attention to the visual dimension of organizations' logics of appropriateness, disregarding the study of how security actors emulate the visual codes of established organizations to (re)construct their identities and increase their legitimacy.

As 'the images of individuality and distinctiveness (selfhood) held and projected by an actor' (Jepperson et al., 1996: 56), identities are formed through and reflected by visual communication (Neumann, 2018: 183). Legitimacy, defined as 'a generalized assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms' (Suchman, 1995: 574), is a sine qua non for the 'access to markets and long term survival' of business organizations (Brown, 1998: 35). This is especially true for firms like private military and security companies (PMSCs), whose survival and growth are threatened by the existence of an anti-mercenary norm (Panke and Petersohn, 2012; Percy, 2007). Scholars have investigated how PMSCs seek to escape the stigma attached to mercenaries by presenting themselves as humanitarian actors (Spearin, 2008), appropriating relief NGOs' discursive frames (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012) and changing the international legal discourses surrounding for-profit providers of armed services (Krahmann, 2012), as well as global security discourses at large (Leander, 2006). This literature, however, primarily examines written texts, overlooking the visual component of PMSCs' discursive legitimization strategies. Even studies that occasionally mention non-textual communication or note that private security firms' ads often 'show babies being fed, or boys laughing' (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012: 378) do not examine logos as a component of PMSCs' visual discourses.

This is unfortunate, as logos have different audiences: prospective customers, firms' own employees, as well as stakeholders and the broader public. Hence, studying PMSCs' logos simultaneously provides theoretical and policy-relevant insights into the increasingly diversified customer base of the market for force, the structures and identities of the commercial players operating therein, and the strategies pursued by those actors to legitimize themselves. An analysis of PMSCs' logos can fill three overlapping research gaps, simultaneously addressing private security studies' neglect of the visual dimension of security firms' legitimizing discourses and identity-formation processes, international relations' disregard for logos as political meaning-making tools, and institutionalists' blindness to the visual dimension of organizations' logic of appropriateness. Initially borrowing heavily from the semiotic codes of the tabs, insignia and coats of arms of military uniforms, most PMSCs' logos have eventually lost any association with the provision of armed activities, often becoming

indistinguishable from those of corporations providing non-military services. Building on insights from institutionalism, Peircean semiotics and marketing studies, I explain this transformation by making two claims.

First, I argue that by ‘transforming natural signs into symbolic discourses through abstraction and condensation’ (Oswald, 2012), logos are a key component of PMSCs’ discursive legitimization strategies. The use of specific logos provides PMSCs with the possibility to: (1) camouflage themselves in the broader business landscape by hiding the true nature of the services provided; (2) shift the blame arising from their own or their competitors’ misbehaviour by signalling their willingness to only provide tightly regulated, defensive services; and (3) mirror a shifting customer base to gain prospective clients’ acceptance and trust. PMSCs’ logos, however, cannot be merely understood as strategies for signalling to an external audience. Visual artefacts like corporate symbols also play an important role in identity-formation processes. Accordingly, the second claim I make in this article is that PMSCs’ logos are not solely forms of camouflaging, mirroring or blame-shifting but also windows into the genealogy and evolving identity of PMSCs, revealing a process of socialization into the aesthetic preferences and logics of appropriateness of the corporate world.

The article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the research design, developing a methodology for examining PMSCs’ logos based on Peircean semiotics. The second briefly examines private security marketing, conceptualizing logos as symbolic acts embedded in PMSCs’ discursive strategies and visual identity systems. The third section identifies three crucial phases in the evolution of the international private security market, examining the logos adopted by PMSCs in each of these. The fourth section and ensuing conclusions analyse the findings of the article and illustrate the political nature of logos, outlining the contribution that logo semiotics can provide to security studies and international relations at large.

Research design and methodology

To show the importance of logos in PMSCs’ identity (re)construction and legitimacy strategies, I conduct a visual narrative of PMSCs’ logos from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day. Specifically, I combine a qualitative, in-depth analysis of specific logos with a diachronic, quantitative examination of the logos of all members of the International Stability Operations Association (ISOA). As the largest industry association and a participant in several regulatory initiatives, the ISOA is a key source of insights into the evolution of PMSCs (Joachim and Schneiker, 2014). To assess diachronic changes in the visual legitimization strategies of ISOA members, I examine the logos of association members at two different moments in time: 2005 and 2018. The visual semiotic analysis of industry logos is complemented with 20 anonymous, semi-structured interviews with spokespersons from PMSCs and contracting officers within the US Department of Defense and State Department. Interviews with industry spokespersons are used to gather information about the rationale underlying the choosing of a specific logo as well as their firm’s marketing strategies and organizational cultures, while US government officials were asked what rationale underlies their customer choices.

Three periods are identified, each characterized by different dominant visual semiotic codes. The first, which I refer to as ‘market inception’, examines the firms operating during the 1990s. In this phase, companies emerging from the shadiness of Cold War mercenary ventures embraced low-profile brands, camouflaging themselves behind logos and names that bore no direct association with the provision of military services. Such logos, however, borrowed heavily from the semiotic codes of soldiers’ uniforms, indirectly revealing the predominance of military cultures in PMSCs’ visual identity systems. The second period, labelled ‘market expansion’, covers the years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In this phase, many new firms formed by retired US military

professionals entered the market. Such companies sought to enhance their competitiveness through more proactive branding strategies primarily targeting contracting officers in the US government by signalling the ability to operate in conflict zones. Accordingly, their logos borrowed heavily from the visual identity systems of US armed forces, displaying colours and symbols traditionally associated with the military profession. Abuses like those perpetrated by Blackwater, however, strengthened the momentum for a tighter regulation of the market. The ensuing phase, referred to as 'market consolidation', sees many large firms abandon colours and symbols drawing from military visual identity systems by adopting more low-key logos that are often undistinguishable from those of businesses providing non-military services. This change can be conceptualized as part of a broader marketing and discursive legitimization strategy aimed at escaping the blame attached to rogue PMSCs by signalling a commitment to provide tightly regulated defensive services, but also as an attempt to mirror the preferences of a shifting customer base and a process of socialization into corporate culture. The visual semiotic approach used as a methodological lens to examine PMSCs' logos and their evolution is presented below.

Logo semiotics: A Peircean approach

The pervasiveness of logos in the everyday has attracted considerable attention. As summarized in Naomi Klein's (1999) bestseller *No Logo*, environmentalists, workers' rights activists and anti-globalists all identified the 'international brandscape' (Klingman, 2007) as the epitome of neoliberalism's discursive hegemony, leveraging large corporations' logos as symbols for social movements to mobilize against (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Klein, 1999). Hence, logos are inherently political. Despite its significance for international relations, however, the study of logos has largely remained confined to scholarship on marketing, semiotics and social movements.

Unlike other elements of firms' brands, logos are directly observable, but their analysis poses various challenges. As stressed by semioticians, visual communication is often inherently ambiguous. As most visual artefacts are polysemic, they are usually more open to interpretation than written texts. Owing to their low information bandwidth (Johannessen, 2017: 2), logos are especially fraught with ambiguity. As stressed by visual security studies scholars, however, the challenges arising from the ambiguity of visual communication are eased by intertextuality (Hansen, 2011). Even simplified communications vehicles like logos are imbricated in broader systems of signification (Oswald, 2012), acquiring more specific meanings when interpreted in relation with one another. The simultaneous examination of different forms of visual communication and other discursive strategies can guide the interpretation of visual artefacts, thereby reducing their ambiguity. Accordingly, I draw on the written discourses deployed by the private security industry in companies' websites and advertisements published in the ISOA magazine to complement the examination of PMSCs' logos. Moreover, my article examines a large population of logos and their transformation over time. While a single logo taken in isolation has a limited information bandwidth, the intertextual study of how a broader population of visual artefacts evolves over time produces valuable insights into PMSCs' identity formation and legitimization strategies.

Both Saussure's and Peirce's approaches to semiotics can contribute to the study of logos. Logos resemble linguistic signs by linking a material signifier to an abstract concept. Even if Saussure was primarily concerned with the relationship between phonetic signifiers and concepts, his semiotic approach is also applicable to visual signifiers like logos (Oswald, 2012). As it departs from linguistics premises, Saussure's theory is especially appropriate for treating logos as discourse, and therefore as visual representations that 'imply social rapport and social power' (Baudrillard, 1983: 88). Most logo semioticians, however, have opted for a Peircean approach (Arnold et al., 2001; Heilbrunn, 1997; Lury, 2004). Peirce's trichotomy between *representamen*

(the sign itself), *object/referent* (what the sign refers to) and *interpretant* (the effect of the sign on the viewer) provides more sophisticated insights into logos than Saussure's binary differentiation between signifier and signified (Peirce, 1991; Saussure, 2001 [1916]). Moreover, Peirce's distinction between *iconic* (imitative representations of a given object), *indexical* (signs pointing at the object via a spatial or causal connection) and *symbolic* signs (arbitrarily connected to an object via conventions like language) is especially useful when classifying industry logos (Arnold et al., 2001; Heilbrunn, 1997). While treating logos as discourse, I will therefore employ Peirce's model and terminology.

Logo semioticians have stressed that there are meanings attached to specific schemes, shapes and symbols (Oswald, 2012). My analysis zooms into two basic *representamens*: colours and symbols. Marketing psychologists have long examined the connections between colours and marketing behaviour. As noted by Guillaume et al. (2016), colours are also security signifiers. Consequently, even if the meanings attached to colours are historically and culturally contingent, some chromatic combinations are more closely associated with certain types of security services than others. The patchwork of colours found in military uniforms and vehicles – for example, khaki, green and black – immediately resonates with the provision of combat in a war zone. As amply demonstrated by psychologists, the colour red is often associated with crises, power and violence, while blue is usually seen as evoking calm, composure and trust, at least in the Western sociocultural environment where most PMSCs market their services (Lury, 2004). Moreover, blue is imbued with more specific security meanings. As epitomized by the flag of the United Nations and the helmets of its peacekeepers, blue is traditionally identified as the colour of peace (Foley, 2017). In addition, it is usually seen as the colour of policing, as testified by most police uniforms and vehicles worldwide (Johnson, 2005).

While colours alone may not necessarily convey specific meaning, chromatic shifts resonate with other aspects of the evolution of PMSCs' logos to signal self-restraint and the commitment to provide defensive services only. Most notably, PMSCs' logos have gradually relinquished the use of shapes and objects closely associated with the battlefield and belonging to the symbolic apparatus of military organizations. Specifically, the iconic display of melee (spears, swords, knives) and fire weapons (pistols, shotguns, rifles), or their indexical representation through objects like bullets and shooting frames, may obviously draw an association between certain firms and the provision of battlefield-related activities. Not all weaponry, however, conveys identical meanings. While guns and swords have an offensive interpretant attached to them, shields, armour and canopies are protective symbols associated with providing self-defence and risk mitigation rather than causing harm to others. Moreover, the specific meanings attached to certain weapons help identify particular market specialties. The display of kukri knives in a logo, for instance, clearly signals a certain firm's ability to deploy Gurkha personnel as armed contractors.

Insights into PMSCs' reliance on or departure from the visual identity systems of military organizations should not solely be derived from colours and symbols, but also from the very shape of logos and the balance between text and images therein. As noted by marketing semioticians, corporate logos can be divided into three categories. Some, like those of Nike or Apple, are '*icotypes*' consisting of a standalone symbol. The majority, however, are wordmarks or '*logotypes*', iconizing firms' names or acronyms through aesthetically pleasing typography and colours. Another frequent category is that of *mixed logos*, which combine symbols and type (Heilbrunn, 1997: 178; Oswald, 2012). Scholars have noted the existence of different relationships between logotypes and icotypes in mixed logos, like *anchorage* (the logotype guides the reader through the different possible interpretations of an icotype), *relay* (logotype and icotype are complementary elements of a wider syntagm), *labelling* (the logotype serves as indexical reference to the icotype) and *mutual determination* (a combination of anchorage and relay) (Heilbrunn, 1997: 178).

The shape of logos and the varying relationship between symbols and type therein also shed light upon the evolution of the international private security industry. Logos consisting of large symbols and small texts usually display striking similarities with the tabs and insignia of soldiers' uniforms, thereby serving as another indicator of PMSCs' proximity to the visual identity systems of the military profession. By contrast, logos consisting in ordinary wordmarks, very conventional in the world of business, may indicate certain firms' willingness to camouflage themselves in the broader population of commercial entities, mirror prospective customers or simply show their socialization into the aesthetic preferences and logic of appropriateness of the corporate world.

PMSCs' logos as discourse

Marketing security as a commodity

Starting from the 1990s, the intersection between the growing demand for security and the proliferation of firms offering armed services created a novel, transnational 'market for force' (Avant, 2005). Consequently, security has witnessed a process of commodification (Krahmann, 2006). Little research has been conducted on how security is sold and purchased as a commodity, what logics underlie the choosing of certain security providers over others, and how PMSCs market their products to effectively compete with one another. Although scholars have hinted at factors like reputation, professionalism, lobbying power and retired military professionals' networks within state institutions as crucial for success (Avant, 2005; Kinsey, 2009; Leander, 2006), there are still no systematic studies of PMSCs' marketing strategies.

Marketing practitioners frequently describe their strategies as revolving around four factors, referred to as the four Ps: the product itself, its price, the place where the product is sold and the way it is promoted (Anderson and Taylor, 1995; McCarthy, 1960). Even if increasingly commodified, security is a peculiar, largely undifferentiated type of product. PMSCs may vary in their protective arrangements, the nationality and training of their personnel, and the costs attached to their services. As the state of being protected from harm, however, security is not a product that differs widely between one service provider and another. Although different companies' protective services may be more or less effective, cumbersome and responsive to customers' needs, PMSCs have limited possibilities to differentiate the product they sell from their competitors' when marketing their services to new clients. Pricing occupies an important role in any market. When the service being sold is essential to the physical safety of the customer, however, price is rarely a key factor in shaping consumers' choices. Moreover, PMSCs are usually hired by customers with large financial resources, who prioritize urgency, expected effectiveness and reliability over costs alone (Interviews 1, 2 and 3). Most US contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, were awarded non-competitively (Cusumano, 2012). Consequently, pricing does not necessarily play a fundamental role in shaping PMSCs' marketing strategies (Interviews 2, 4 and 5). Another key element of marketing is place. Effectively planning the delivery of products to customers via appropriate distribution chains is crucial for business success. Most PMSCs, however, are firms with global expeditionary capabilities that can deliver security services worldwide, either directly or via subsidiaries (Avant, 2005).

The largely undifferentiated nature of the product sold, the reduced role of price in shaping consumers' choices and the fact that most PMSCs are able to provide security on a global scale all increase the relative importance of the fourth marketing principle: promotion. In order to successfully compete with each other, firms must be able to promote themselves, attracting consumers through effective branding. Brands are defined as a system of signs and symbols that contribute tangible value to a product's offering (Danesi, 2008; Oswald, 2012). Aspects of branding like the

choice of specific logos should play an especially important role for firms selling largely undifferentiated products, such as PMSCs, attaching additional value to services that are otherwise indistinguishable from those of competitors (Klein, 1999).

Logos as identity markers and symbolic acts

Logos are visual, value-making systems that help firms attract consumers and differentiate themselves from their competitors, and that sit at the cusp of the symbolic apparatus referred to as the branding iceberg (Danesi, 2008; Lury, 2004; Oswald, 2012). Initially created as marks of ownership for cattle and pottery, logos started serving as standards of quality assurance, protecting firms from unfair competition since the beginning of industrial protection and the development of trademark law (Lury, 2004: 75). Although crucial for firms to differentiate themselves in a competitive market, logos are not merely corporate assets. By the second half of the 20th century, they also became 'organizations' face' (Lury, 2004: 64), serving as 'the ultimate sign of a company's visual identity system' (Schechter, 1993: 33) or a 'flag which expresses the values and intention of the organization it represents' (Heilbrunn, 1997: 176). Consequently, the choosing of a specific logo can be conceptualized as a 'symbolic act' (Arnold et al., 2001) revealing key elements of a company's identity and signalling adherence to the prevailing norms of the environment in which it operates.

As noted by marketing scholars, even profit-oriented organizations like commercial firms tend to align with prevailing norms in order to increase their legitimacy. These isomorphic tendencies not only shape corporations' structure and behaviour, but also inform their symbolic and visual attributes (Arnold et al., 2001). By tapping into a specific symbolic apparatus, organizations 'identify with other actors, values or symbols that are themselves legitimate' (Glynn and Abzug, 2002: 268). Studies of symbolic isomorphism, however, have focused on the convergence of private organizations' names (Glynn and Abzug, 2002) and the architectural styles of their headquarters (Wasserman, 2011), leaving business logos largely unexplored. As an attempt to increase an organization's legitimacy by adopting the symbolic attributes of established actors, symbolic isomorphism should be especially pronounced in the case of firms suffering from a legitimacy deficit, like PMSCs. Since norm compliance is both objective and symbolic, marketing strategies like the choosing of certain logos are attuned to specific normative expectations and logics of appropriateness. Hence, PMSCs' logos serve as symbolic acts signalling compliance with certain norms to customers, employees, shareholders, stakeholders and broader civil society alike.

As visual discourses, however, logos are not only a strategy for signalling to an external audience but also 'marks of social identity' (Lury, 2004: 64). PMSCs possess multiple coexisting identities, drawn from the organizational cultures of both armed forces and commercial business (Joachim and Schneiker, 2014). By assessing the varying importance of semiotic codes borrowed from the visual identity systems of the military and the corporate world, an analysis of PMSCs' logos provides novel insights into PMSCs' genealogy and identity (re)construction processes.

A visual history of PMSCs' logos

The visual history of PMSCs' logos conducted in this section identifies three phases in the history of today's market for force. Each of these phases is characterized by the use of specific visual semiotic codes. These codes provide important insights not only into the evolution of the market for force and the ways PMSCs compete therein, but also into the visual identity systems and legitimization strategies of the international private security industry.

The inception of the market

Groups of Western mercenaries and small private security companies operated in the developing world throughout the Cold War (Kinsey, 2009). Most scholars, however, identify the inception of today's private military industry with the establishment of two firms directly selling combat-support services: Executive Outcomes (EO) and Sandline International (Avant, 2005; Singer, 2003).

To distance themselves from mercenaries and legitimize themselves as lawful, professional corporate entities, firms like Executive Outcomes and Sandline mimicked the same organizational structures of established corporations, consisting of chief executive officers (CEOs), chief operations officers (COOs), and so forth (Barlow, 2007; Spicer, 1999). These isomorphic tendencies also had a visual component. Like firms operating in other sectors, EO and Sandline developed their own logos. Such logos yield important insights into the legitimization strategies and identities of early PMSCs, characterized by the attempt to escape controversy by camouflaging the true nature of their activities, but also by the indirect predominance of military semiotics codes in their visual identity systems.

Executive Outcomes

Founded by Eeben Barlow in 1992, Executive Outcomes became renowned for its involvement in the civil wars in Angola in 1992 and Sierra Leone in 1995 (Barlow, 2007; Singer, 2003).

The logo chosen by Barlow, the chess knight shown in Figure 1 chess knight, has no direct association with the provision of combat. While chess pieces are loosely connected with the notion of strategy and may therefore serve as an indexical sign vaguely pointing at the military realm, they would hardly look unusual as logos of any business consultancy. The chess knight icotype and the logotype at the bottom are thus not anchored but completely disjointed. Far from guiding the reader towards the correct interpretation of the logotype, the words 'Executive Outcomes' convey the misleading impression that the icotype is indexical to consultancy services such as the planning of corporate strategies.

EO's representamen, however, indirectly reveals the prominence of the visual semiotic codes of the military profession owing to its shape. The combination of a large icotype with a smaller logotype anchored at its bottom closely resembles the tabs and patches of military uniforms. Moreover, EO's symbol also enshrines a hidden meaning, as Barlow purportedly chose the knight chess piece because it featured in the old television series on mercenaries 'Have Gun, Will Travel' (Venter, 2003: 577). The tendency of PMSCs to hide behind names and symbols with an esoteric meaning



Figure 1. Executive Outcomes' logo.

is not unique to EO. For instance, the name of the large US PMSC Triple Canopy, which may simply evoke the provision of defensive risk-mitigation services to most civilians, is used in the US special operations forces community to identify elite airborne units (Interview 6). Likewise, the now-defunct British firm Keenie Meenie Services (KMS) got its name from a piece of UK military slang for covert operations (Venter, 2003). In a similar fashion, EO's logo may have been chosen because, while relatively unimpressive to the broader public, it was loaded with a hidden meaning that could only be decoded within the inner circle of those security professionals interested in hiring armed contractors or working as one.

Sandline International

The British firm Sandline International also signed combat-support contracts with the governments of Papua New Guinea and Sierra Leone. Its activities, however, raised fierce controversy and were halted before their start (Kinsey, 2009; Singer, 2003; Spicer, 1999). Sandline's misfortunes showed to its founder – former British Army officer Tim Spicer – that the direct provision of combat offered no viable business opportunities. After Sandline closed in 2002, Spicer created the private security firm Aegis, which became one of the largest providers of defensive protective services in Iraq (Avant, 2005; Kinsey, 2009).

Like that of Executive Outcomes, Sandline's unimpressive logo, consisting of the combination of brush strokes and type shown in Figure 2, conveys no direct association with the provision of combat. Sandline's representamen, showing a line in the sand, is iconic to its name. Symbol and type are therefore linked by mutual determination. Object and interpretant, however, are ambiguous. Although drawing a line in the sand is a figure of speech evoking staunch resolve and was reportedly used by US soldiers at the Battle of the Alamo to epitomize their refusal to surrender, name and logo alone hardly suffice in identifying Sandline as a provider of military services. As in the case of EO, however, the choice of a text in capital letters anchored at the bottom of a large icotype draws on the visual semiotic codes of the military professions. The chromatic juxtapositions of two mimetic colours forming a quadrangular shape with a text at the bottom bears an even closer resemblance to uniform patches, thereby indirectly revealing proximity to military visual identity systems.



Figure 2. Sandline's logo.

In the case of both Sandline and EO, the choice of logos without any direct connection to the provision of combat can be read as a deliberate attempt to keep a low profile and display a legitimate corporate image. Sandline and EO's efforts to distance themselves from unlawful, discredited combat providers like Cold War mercenaries resonates with their broader discursive strategies. The creation of the term 'private military company' is especially telling. First coined by Barlow as an alternative to the derogatory adjective 'mercenary', the notion of the 'private military company' or 'firm' was later used also by Spicer (1999) and then introduced in the academic debate (Singer, 2003).

Market growth

The demise of EO and Sandline in the 1990s showed that for-profit offensive services were too controversial to offer viable, long-term business opportunities. A few years later, the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan enormously increased the demand for armed protection. Consequently, the industry moved away from the provision of direct combat and started capitalizing on the outsourcing of security and military support by Western governments. Most notably, the demand for protective services in Iraq, driven by the US government and its prime contractors, soon created a 'private security bubble' (Kinsey, 2009; Krahnmann, 2006).

This skyrocketing demand for armed security led to the proliferation of many new PMSCs both in the USA and in the UK. The largest industry association, the ISOA (then still called the International Peace Operations Association), grew from 13 to 35 members between 2001 and 2008. Proactive branding strategies are especially important for firms entering a highly competitive market and needing to distinguish themselves (Strandgaard Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006: 902). Accordingly, several PMSCs chose logos explicitly displaying symbols and colours borrowed from military visual identity systems. Such logos effectively reflected both the structure of these firms – consisting primarily of retired US servicemen – and their positioning in a market where US government contracts offered the most lucrative business opportunities. Displaying such symbols and colours allowed these firms to signal the background of their personnel and their ability to work alongside the US military in counterinsurgency theatres like Iraq and Afghanistan. The logo of Blackwater International, probably the most renowned and controversial PMSC operating in Iraq, is a case in point.

The rise and fall of Blackwater

Founded in 1997 as a military training provider by former Navy Seal Erik Prince, Blackwater started to directly offer armed security soon after the invasion of Iraq (Cusumano, 2017; Prince, 2013). From 2004 on, Blackwater was tasked with protecting US State Department personnel in Baghdad, obtaining contracts with that department for over \$340 million (Prince, 2013: 169–170). Renowned for its assertive security services aimed at proactively deterring attacks, Blackwater ensured the safety of all US diplomats under its protection, but at the price of significant collateral damage. Aggressive driving and preemptive shootings repeatedly resulted in the killing of Iraqi civilians, leading a State Department memo to conclude that Blackwater contractors 'saw themselves as above the law' (Cusumano, 2017: 43). Blackwater's organizational culture created a permissive environment for aggressive behaviour (Fitzimmons, 2013: 709).

According to Prince (2013), Blackwater's symbol was chosen after he found a bear's footprint in the military training facility he had bought in Virginia. The clawed black bear's paw encircled by a red shooting frame shown in Figure 3, however, perfectly epitomizes an aggressive private security brand, neatly matching the firm's organizational identity and marketing strategies.



Figure 3. From Blackwater to Academi.

Blackwater's logo is not just an iconic representamen of an animal paw: its interpretant clearly conveys a sense of urgent danger. The red shooting frame can be seen as indexical for the provision of armed services, thereby pointing to the need to anticipate risk by proactively resorting to lethal force. Today's battlefield has been reconstructed as a hunting ground (Guillaume et al., 2016). The usage of visual artefacts borrowing from hunting, however, does not only metaphorically evoke war. Hunting symbols effectively resonated with the visual identity of Blackwater's prospective customers and employees, conveying a familiar message to the population of male American individuals with a military background who could either hire Blackwater as US government officers or work for them as guards.

Blackwater did not just borrow from hunting imagery. In its usage of a wordmark forming an arch at the top of the icotype, Blackwater's representamen also displays similarities with the logos of many US basketball, football, hockey and baseball teams, evoking interpretants like competitiveness, sportsmanship and camaraderie (Bishop, 2001). By drawing on sports and hunting cultures, Blackwater developed an iconic logo that effectively resonates with US consumer mythology (Barthes, 1983; Levy, 1981). The effectiveness of Blackwater's representamen is epitomized by the fact that it survived the very referent it was created for. Even after Blackwater ceased to exist as a private security firm, its brand spawned into pop culture and inspired an Xbox videogame. In 2020, the bear-paw trademark owned by Erik Prince still continues to be printed on coffee mugs, baseball caps and t-shirts. The survival of Blackwater's logo epitomizes a widely known phenomenon in marketing semiotics: a certain 'mark or emblem is not just the designation of a valuable product, but becomes a valuable product in its own right' (Frow, 2002: 66).

In September 2007, four Blackwater guards escorting a diplomatic motorcade through Baghdad's Nisour Square killed 14 Iraqi civilians. This incident became the epitome of the widespread culture of impunity among US contractors in Iraq. Public outcry eventually forced the US government to cancel its contracts with Blackwater. The firm, which made around 90% of its revenues from

federal contracts, found itself out of business (Cusumano, 2017). Blackwater's rapid downfall perfectly illustrates the phenomenon known as 'brand boomerang' (Klein, 1999): iconic logos can trigger social mobilization against their referents, thereby becoming instruments of resistance to specific corporations and industries (Hodge and Kress, 1988). Often used in public protests, Blackwater's bear paw permeated the visual imaginary of those opposing the invasion of Iraq, becoming not only the specimen of unaccountable armed contractors but a broader symbol of an unjust war.

Market regulation and consolidation

Nisour Square had far-reaching consequences for the private security industry. As Blackwater's brand had become 'toxic', distancing themselves from the company's aggressive private security model became essential for other PMSCs to remain in business (Interviews 1, 2, 3 and 7).

The combination of civil society's requests for regulation and industry willingness to escape the reputational damage arising from association with Blackwater strengthened the momentum for self-regulatory and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Corporate social responsibility is a way for firms to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Accordingly, most established PMSCs agreed to abide by the International Code of Conduct on Private Security Providers and various regulatory standards. As these industry-supported initiatives allowed larger firms to stay aloof from rogue competitors and drive smaller players out of the market, they can be read as a broader discursive attempt to reconstruct PMSCs' identity (Krahmann, 2012).

PMSCs' efforts to distance themselves from Blackwater are forcefully illustrated by the widespread tendency to change their logos after the Nisour Square incident. Rebranding often reflects a blame-shifting strategy pursued to avoid the reputational damage arising from own or competitors' misbehaviour (Klein, 1999). Unsurprisingly, Blackwater itself sought to disperse blame by rebranding. The representamens chosen by Blackwater's reincarnations forcefully show the importance of logos as part of PMSCs' legitimization strategies.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Blackwater was first renamed Xe, after the inert gas xenon (Brannen, 2014). Accordingly, its new logo was a logotype consisting of a large black *X* containing a small white *e*, deprived of any iconic or indexical features. Haunted by Blackwater's legacy and struggling to re-establish itself as a reputable security provider, Xe renamed itself Academi. According to the CEO, the firm was named after Plato's academia to capture its new corporate identity as a provider of 'elite training' (Ukman, 2012). The new representamen chosen was the juxtaposition of three book pages resembling shields, followed by the name of the firm. In an attempt to escape the stigma attached to Blackwater, Academi chose a much more low-profile, defensive symbol. According to commentators, this rebranding successfully safeguarded the firm's business prospects (Brannen, 2014).

Other firms, too, opted to replace their logos. MPRI, which had provided military training in Angola, Croatia and numerous other theatres, merged into a larger conglomerate called Engility. As a result, the indexical medieval sword disappeared from the logo shown in Figure 4, replaced by an ordinary logotype. The armed-security provider SOC is another case in point. As shown by Figure 5, SOC initially opted for a logo displaying the silhouette of a man embracing a rifle, encircled by a green background. Colours and forms often found in military uniforms, as well as the display of the iconic representamen of a soldier, reveal obvious proximity to the military realm. Eventually, however, SOC adopted a more professional corporate logotype simply consisting of the acronym in white on a dark grey and sand field.

Even the International Peace Operations Association, to which most international PMSCs belong, decided to rebrand, renaming itself as the ISOA to describe its members' engagement in a large range of stability services not necessarily associated with peace – and, conversely, war. While



Figure 4. From MPRI to Engility.



Figure 5. SOC's rebranding.



Figure 6. From IPOA to ISOA.

doing so, the ISOA also changed its logo. The original representamen – the sleeping red lion shown in Figure 6 – had been envisaged by the first director of the association, who had identified peace-keeping and security sector reform as primary markets for PMSCs. Accordingly, he opted for a trope vaguely evoking sub-Saharan Africa as its interpretant (Interview 7). The new logo shown in figure 6, a simple blue shield containing a white logotype, better reflects the more global outlook of its members and has an indexical connection to the provision of defensive protective services.

These shifts illustrate a broader transformation of PMSCs' logos, reflecting a willingness to no longer display symbols and colours associated with the military realm. Consequently, chromatic combinations featuring khaki or red eventually became less frequent, and shapes and symbols suggesting a direct association with the provision of combat were for the most part abandoned. A diachronic, quantitative analysis of PMSCs' logos further illustrates this point. The logos of the 35 ISOA (then IPOA) members in 2005 were found on the association's official magazine, *Journal of International Peace Operations*, while those of the 99 members of the association in 2018 were (and can still be) observed on the ISOA website. As ISOA members almost tripled between 2005 and 2018, percentile variations are more useful indicators of the evolution of PMSCs' logos than absolute figures.

As illustrated by the chart in Figure 7, the percentage of ISOA members employing military symbols and colours plummeted between 2005 and 2018, shrinking to less than 10% of the total. The percentage of companies displaying logos in which the colour red was predominant also

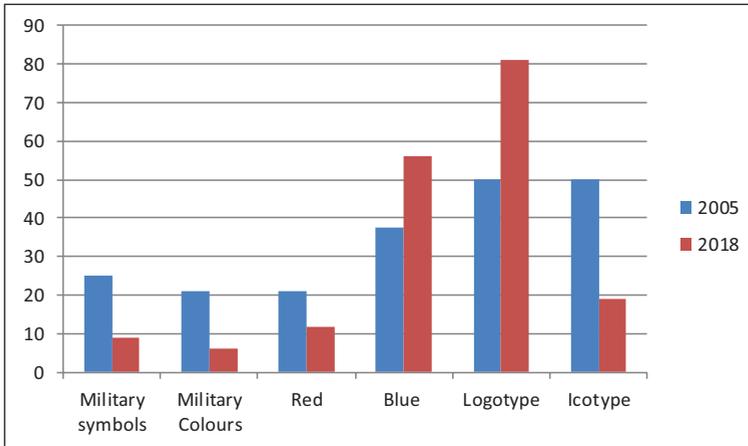


Figure 7. Percentile variation in ISOA members' logos. (Source: *Journal of International Peace Operations* [2005] and ISOA website [2018].)



Figure 8. FSI's logo.

halved, while the usage of blue increased substantially. Lastly, PMSCs' logos also featured a significant change in the balance between symbols and type. In 2005, half of ISOA members had mixed logos consisting of large icotypes anchored to small texts. In 2018, less than 20 firms still displayed large symbols as logos. Most companies opted for ordinary logotypes consisting of the name or initials of the firm, slightly embellished by discreet colours, lines and basic shapes.

Like all discursive constructions, PMSCs' logos continue to contain contradictions and exceptions, sometimes displaying the survival of military symbols as residual codes. Firms occupying a specific niche are a case in point. For instance, FSI Worldwide, specialized in the provision of Gurkha security teams, continues to show the traditional kukri knife as an index to its market specialty. The employment as security guards of Nepalese Gurkhas, identified as a 'martial race' during British rule, reflects and perpetuates colonial narratives (Chisholm, 2014). By reproducing symbols like kukri knives, logos also resonate with this discourse.

Iconic and indexical logos like FSI's, showing weapons or symbols associated with the battlefield, have, however, become increasingly rare. After the Nisour Square incident, an overwhelming majority of firms opted for representamens suggesting no direct association with military organizations and the provision of combat. The broader PMSCs' brandscape, however, shows a transition from iconic and indexical signs conveying interpretants associated with battlefield activities to more ordinary, symbolic corporate representamens.

What's in a logo? An analysis

The changing use of colours, shapes and symbols, as well as the shifting balance between logotypes and icotypes, reveals a transformation in PMSCs' legitimization strategies and

visual identities. Specifically, PMSCs' logos can be conceptualized as the outcome of four complementary and partly overlapping processes: camouflaging, blame-shifting, mirroring and socialization into corporate cultures.

Logos as camouflaging

First, the usage of certain logos can be understood as a form of camouflaging. Like military units seeking to avoid detection by blending into their external environment, different PMSCs sought to diminish their vulnerability to public criticism by choosing unimpressive representaments with interpretants that do not evoke the provision of armed services. In such cases, logos may fulfil a purpose that is somewhat opposite to their traditional expressive function: instead of condensing and conveying as much information as possible to help identify a business and distinguish its products, logos used as camouflaging tools allow firms to hide the services they provide from public scrutiny.

This was the strategy chosen by the highly controversial providers of direct combat identified as the first modern PMSCs, EO and Sandline. An attentive examination, however, reveals that such logos still indirectly tapped into the visual identity of the military profession. The logos of both Sandline and EO consist of large icotypes resembling military patches, and, in the case of Sandline, colours that are typical of mimetic uniforms. Moreover, symbols like EO's chess piece have a hidden, esoteric meaning that can be decoded by an inner circle of military professionals while going unnoticed by the broader public. Camouflaging is therefore part of a low-profile branding strategy aimed at deliberately diminishing PMSCs' visibility, making them indistinguishable from the much larger population of businesses providing mundane services in order to reduce public scrutiny.

Logos as blame-shifting

Relatedly, the adoption or replacement of a certain logo can be understood as a form of blame-shifting, a tactic long known in marketing studies and by no means unique to PMSCs. Rebranding allows firms to escape the reputational damage arising from large-scale scandals and unlawful behaviour. Such a strategy may be pursued not only by corporations involved in a scandal but also by their business competitors. As research shows, the reputational damage caused by a single firm may spill over to an entire market, triggering a guilt-by-association psychological mechanism. After a scandal, many firms operating in a certain market may therefore rebrand to avoid such reputational spillovers (Klein and Dawar, 2004).

PMSCs provide evidence of both types of behaviour. As Blackwater and its successors show, PMSCs involved in high-profile scandals have changed their logos in order to disperse the blame arising from previous cases of misbehaviour. After Nisour Square, most PMSCs operating in Iraq actively tried to distance themselves from Blackwater by signalling their commitment to refrain from providing offensive services and accept tight regulatory standards. The replacement of logos displaying offensive objects and military colours in favour of defensive symbols and neutral colours or simply unimpressive logotypes reflects such a blame-shifting strategy.

Logos as mirroring

While camouflaging is a form of behaviour aimed at reducing one's visibility by blending into the surrounding environment, mirroring is a more targeted form of mimicking long known in business-to-business marketing, where firms often seek to gain the trust of prospective customers by emulating their behaviour and preferences (Peterson and Limbu, 2009). As noted by existing scholarship, PMSCs have appropriated the identities of partners from the military,

nongovernmental and business world (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012, 2014). My study confirms and advances this finding by noting that PMSCs' logos have been used to mirror their customers. The transformation of industry logos therefore reveals the evolution of the customer base of PMSCs.

When the demand for private security from US government agencies in Iraq decreased, firms proactively sought to offer their services to a larger number of corporate and nongovernmental entities. Logos that were effective at attracting contracting officers from the US Department of Defense and State Department by tapping into US military visual identity systems and hunting and sports cultures thus became detrimental to market-diversification imperatives. As explained by an industry spokesperson, large extractive industry firms expected PMSCs to display logos as professional as their own. Most notably, large extractive corporations – themselves wary of reputational damage and public boycotts – would frown upon certain logos as inappropriate, flagging firms that resorted to military symbols and colours as potential future liabilities (Interviews 4, 5 and 7). Consequently, PMSCs selling security services to such corporations developed strong incentives to adapt to the visual identity of their customers, mirroring their logos to increase the chance of being accepted as professional, reliable business partners.

Logos as corporate socialization

(Re)branding, however, may not necessarily be pursued with the explicit goal of camouflaging the true nature of PMSCs' activities, shifting blame or explicitly mirroring prospective customers. In many cases, PMSCs' logos evolved in accordance with the international private security industry's changing employee population, organograms and organizational cultures. This allows for conceptualizing logos as indicators of PMSCs' socialization into corporate identities.

During the 1990s, most PMSCs had a very light organizational apparatus, consisting of little more than a list of retired military personnel to be summoned at need (Singer, 2003). The growth experienced in the 2000s allowed many firms to consolidate, developing more sophisticated corporate structures. Owing to mergers and acquisitions, many smaller PMSCs became parts of larger, publicly traded conglomerates or subsidiaries of corporations selling a wider array of services. Accordingly, firms previously employing only a few retired military officers started to recruit professionals with a business background, including accountants, lawyers and marketing experts (Interviews 4, 5, and 7). PMSCs' identities are therefore increasingly characterized by a hybridization of military and corporate cultures.

Verbal communication strategies reflect this change, showing that PMSCs' business identities are substantiated by discursive reference to norms and concepts that are typical of the corporate world, including transparency, corporate social responsibility, flexibility and cost-effectiveness (Joachim and Schneiker, 2014: 256). Visual discourses also started to resonate with this verbal communication. As PMSCs became increasingly imbued with corporate cultures, amateurish logos displaying battlefield paraphernalia started to be seen as inappropriate not only by stakeholders and prospective customers but also by firms' own executives and employees. Hence, such representaments were replaced by logos seen as more coherent with corporate visual identities, consisting of logotypes characterized by minimalist elegance and nuanced colours. These semiotic codes better convey the interpretants that are most typically signalled by commercial entities, like professionalism, trustworthiness, composure and discretion (Oswald, 2012; Lury, 2004).

Far from being mutually exclusive, the processes of camouflaging, blame-shifting, mirroring and corporate socialization summarized above are complementary and partly overlapping, but may vary in intensity depending on the size and customer base of each firm. Smaller PMSCs with a narrower pool of employees, for instance, are arguably less subjected to socialization into

corporate culture than larger, more structured firms. Likewise, companies specialized in providing niche support services to military organizations may have lower incentives to mirror large corporations. Consequently, such firms may continue to rely on residual codes borrowed from armed forces' visual identity systems to signal their ability to operate on the battlefield.

Conclusions

The converging influence of camouflaging, blame-shifting, mirroring and corporate socialization reshaped PMSCs' brandscape, informing a shift away from the use of logos displaying symbols and colours drawing on military visual identity systems.

Logos are symbolic acts with three different audiences: prospective customers; stakeholders, media and the broader general public; and firms' own employees and shareholders. Accordingly, PMSCs' logos have important implications for the evolution of the market for force and international security at large. Most notably, the changing discursive strategies underlying industry logos show the increasingly diversified customer base of PMSCs, which no longer consists solely of the contracting officers of military organizations interested in the provision of combat support. Moreover, the shift away from military symbols and colours has allowed PMSCs to reduce their visibility before the broader public and signal restraint, thereby helping shift the blame attached to scandals, legitimize the existence of an international market for force and consolidate the increasing commodification of security.

By conducting a visual semiotic analysis of PMSCs' logos, my article has sought to address the blindness of international relations scholarship to the ubiquity of logos in the international landscape. While they serve an important marketing function, logos are not neutral corporate identifiers but epitomize the inextricable link between the visual and the political. Specifically, logos are political in at least three different respects. Given their pervasiveness in the everyday, logos epitomize the discursive hegemony of large corporations. As documented by Naomi Klein (1999), however, logos can be turned into instruments of social mobilization and become embedded into anti-corporate activism and the politics of resistance. The widespread presence of Blackwater's logo in online campaigns and street protests against the Iraq war is a case in point. Second, logos are political in that, like more elaborated visual artefacts, they 'frame a sense of identity and community' (Bleiker, 2018: 24). As noted by Neumann (2018), identity formation is a visual exercise. The evolution of PMSCs' logos reflects the reconstruction of their identities, signalling increasing socialization to the aesthetic preferences and logics of appropriateness of the corporate world. Third, logos are political because they serve as legitimization tools, integrating written discourses in presenting private security professionals as restrained, ethical professionals exclusively providing defensive services. The disappearance of symbols and colours associated with the military sphere enabled PMSCs to shift the blame attached to aggressive private security providers and camouflage themselves within the broader population of corporate entities providing non-military services. By revealing and/or concealing, 'images frame and reframe the political' (Bleiker, 2018: 20). Hence, the transformation of PMSCs' logos reflects what Bleiker (2018: 20–22) describes as the politics of visibility and invisibility. By camouflaging the nature of the services they provide, logos contribute to (re)framing the private security industry and distancing contractors from mercenaries no less than written texts.

As even visual artefacts with a low information bandwidth like logos are inherently political, international relations scholars' interest in logos should not stop at PMSCs. The international corporate brandscape should be of interest to international political economy and public diplomacy scholars, who can examine the importance of logos and visibility at large in buttressing the discursive hegemony of actors like the USA or triggering resistance against it. Security studies

scholars may be especially interested in the logos and discursive legitimization strategies of the defence industry, which has increasingly deployed ‘humanitarian’ narratives emphasizing minimal collateral damage and high force protection (Schörnig and Lembcke, 2006). Lastly, logos also are an important component of the discourses of NGOs. While they are not-for-profit entities, NGOs often compete for limited funding. Consequently, effective branding strategies are key to organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières or Greenpeace. Attention to logos is therefore warranted from scholars of global civil society, too.

Even if words like mimicking and emulation precisely identify the tendency to imitate the looks of others, institutionalist international relations scholarship has paid strikingly little attention to organizations’ adoption of the visual attributes of established actors. As this article has demonstrated, the fact that certain security providers choose to imitate the visual features of certain actors as opposed to others sheds light on their shifting identities and normative frameworks. Future scholarship should therefore examine whether practices like camouflaging, blame-shifting, mirroring and corporate socialization are unique to the private security brandscape or can be found in other sectors as well. As visibility is an ‘interdiscipline’ (Vuori and Andersen, 2019), a more systematic examination of logos would not only advance the study of visual global politics but also cross-cut disciplinary boundaries between fields that rarely interact, such as international relations and marketing studies.

Private security scholars in particular may build on this article in at least three respects. Existing scholarship has noted that British PMSCs built their identity in opposition to their US counterparts, which they depicted as unprofessional cowboys (Higate, 2011). An examination of the logos of British PMSCs, which are often more low profile than those of US firms, suggests that visibility plays a meaningful role in such identity-construction mechanisms. Moreover, the resort to symbols drawn from combat, hunting and professional sports arguably reflects the (re)production of gender identities in the private security industry noted by several scholars (Eichler, 2015; Higate, 2011). Sociologists of private security should therefore pay more attention to PMSCs’ visual identity systems, expanding this analysis to firms operating in other geographical areas and comparing the logos of international PMSCs with those of the broader population of domestic private security firms. Last, future visual private security studies should move beyond logos, examining a broader population of artefacts. Most notably, scholars may examine the influence of PMSCs’ advertisements and visual communication on securitization processes, but also investigate whether the deployment of contractors wearing civilian clothing instead of soldiers in uniforms contributes to (de)securitization practices.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Xavier Guillaume, David Shim, Jutta Joachim, Elke Krahmann, Andrea Schneider and all the participants at the 2017 European Initiative on Security Studies (EISS) conference, where I presented an early draft of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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