Epilogue: Conversations with Clifford Shearing (II)

Introduction

When I first started researching private policing in 1986/1987, hardly any literature was available. Much of the early writings on private security were completed by Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning. As true pioneers, they ventured outside the criminal justice system, and I read and used much of their work compiled in the 1980s. They were a constant inspiration. Jan van Dijk, then director of the scientific research department of the Ministry of Justice I worked for at the time, once made a cynical remark about the number of Shearing and Stenning references I made. But it was the same Jan van Dijk who made it possible for me to cross the Atlantic to deliver my first-ever speech: a presentation to be held in 1987 at an academic conference in Montreal. After my speech, someone came up to me and introduced himself: Philip Stenning. I met Clifford Shearing briefly in 2006 at a Mannheim seminar organised by the London School of Economics.

Clifford Shearing keeps crossing my path: from my early work on privatisation through my research and lectures on policing to the more recently developed nodal security perspective. He has been an inspiration and, in many ways, a role model. This chapter is written as a ‘conversation’ with him, not to sing his praises even more loudly – I think I have made my point in this respect – but because of the German saying ‘was sich liebt, das neckt sich’, the quarrel of lovers is the renewal of love. In conversing with him here, I introduce five themes on which I differ in opinion. Only through a ‘clash of opinions’ can we move...
forward on the bumpy roads we walk to understand something of the bewildering world of policing and security.

Conversation 1

‘Jack Daniels, straight please’

Much of Shearing and Stenning’s early work on private security stresses the concept of ‘loss prevention’ as the main objective of private security as opposed to criminal justice objectives. Crime in a private context is fundamentally different from crime in the public sector, because ‘crime’ is only defined as ‘crime’ when losses occur. Shearing and Stenning have stripped preventive and repressive actions carried out by private individuals from normative connotations expressed by the public sector and the criminal justice system.

The definition of what exactly constitutes ‘crime’ differs over time and is dependent on its context as well as the power relations exhibited within it. This would explain why the private sector so often fails to file criminal complaints. As discussed in previous chapters, the private sector and the criminal justice system operate in ‘multiple realities’. Let me illustrate this. During my university studies, I took up all sorts of odd jobs to make a bit of money. For a number of months, I worked with some of my fellow students; my weekend job with a fruit company involved packaging fruit for supermarkets. Every Saturday afternoon, the general manager would take out a few cases of beer, which we drank rather fast, not really limiting ourselves. A private security guard would sometimes include our hall in his rounds. Every now and then, he was treated to a can of beer by the general manager. Every Saturday, we would all walk out of this mass private property with somewhat more alcohol in our systems than the public police would generally allow. And every Saturday I would observe the general manager driving by in his car, greeting the security guard standing at the gate and wishing him a good weekend. To me, this anecdote is meaningful for understanding the nature, function and paradoxes of private security. Private security goals, objectives, means and mentalities fundamentally differ from those related to public policing.

My point here is that some of the original and groundbreaking insights of the early Shearing and Stenning work have become somewhat ‘diluted’, such as the actual meaning of the more pragmatic (commercial) definition of crime and the original meaning of private justice (Shearing and Stenning, 1987a). Also, for instance, the concept of ‘loss prevention’ as distinct from the criminal justice system is no