

**THE PRIVATE MILITARISED AND SECURITY
CONTRACTOR AS GEOCORPOREAL ACTOR**

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Abstract

This paper uses a phenomenology of the body approach to explaining the embodied practices of security contractors with a focus on Iraq and Afghanistan. It draws on the author's field-research as well as memoirs authored by contractors to reveal the role of military corporeal conditioning to the emergence of the industry. This is done in ways that demonstrate the interconnected character of bodies trained in violence with the geopolitical conditions that have made possible the rise of PMSCs in contemporary times. The paper concludes with a focus on questions of agent intentionality, responsibility and who might be best suited to working in the role of armed security contractor.

'If ever there was a place that needed highly trained killers, it was Iraq' (Steve Fainaru in *Big Boys Rules*, 2008:22).

'It's what you do ... you spend twenty years doing things like riding high-speed boats and jumping out of airplanes. Now all of a sudden you're selling insurance. It's tough' (Jeremy Scahill in *Blackwater*, 2007:136).

In this paper I develop the concept of geocorporeality as one way in which to address neglect of the body in the Private and Military Security Company (PMSC) literature. In so doing, my broader aim is to locate particular bodies trained in violence in their wider political context through positing a post-Cartesian approach influenced by the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and developed subsequently by scholars in sociology and political science. My argument is that veteran contractors – particularly those with backgrounds in the combat arms - can be seen as body-subjects with a distinct mode of agency that has shaped the global development of the industry as well as raise questions around contractor intentionality, responsibility and thus, security. In elucidating this argument further, I adopt a phenomenological approach to the body-subject through examining two aspects of the industry that turn on the political legacy of its employee's corporeal conditioning. First, is a consideration of the bodily contingent emergence of the industry, examined in the case of Iraq from 2003 where specific aspects of corporeal continuity are revealed through a focus on the role of adrenaline, military drill and weapons handling. Second, the security implications of national-

cultural military trajectories of the contractor body-subject are examined as they play out on the ground in Afghanistan. These two lines of enquiry are informed respectively, by secondary data derived from contractor memoirs (see Higate 2012 for a fuller discussion) covering the period in Iraq between 2003-2008, and in the case of the latter, primary data from the author's observational field research in Afghanistan in 2010 where the heuristic of high versus low profile approaches to security are used to show how contractors both adopt and understand these stances in bodily terms.¹ In the closing sections of the paper, the wider ramifications of developing a geocorporeal approach to PMSCs are taken up. Here, I contribute towards debates on the future of the industry in ways that unsettle the unspoken assumption that veterans are, without question, the most suitable actors for armed security work in the private sphere. Through locating PMSCs corporeal dimensions in their local and international contexts, a politics of phenomenology pertaining to the contractor body is examined for the first time, and in so doing underscores the significance of the industry's fleshy dimensions as they shape a controversial, multi-billion dollar enterprise with a growing role in global security governance. Overall, this paper makes an original theoretical and empirical contribution to the PMSC literature in regard to the industry's emergence, visibility and future. It also augments the IR and political science literatures within which the scholarship on PMSCs is nested. Taken as a whole, these literatures have yet to grasp the significance of actor intentionality as it is mediated through a particular embodied community conceived of through a synthesis of the international/local, and illuminated through the concept of geocorporeality.

Context: The Rise of the PMSC

Facilitated by the dominance of post-cold war markets, a constellation of forces have underpinned the rapid growth of the PMSC in recent years (Geraghty 2007:22-31; Kinsey 2007; Berndtsson 2010). These include the downsizing of national militaries providing for a large number of men trained in the legitimate discharge of violence ripe for recruitment by PMSC (Cooling 2010), the growing availability of arms stocks on the open market that have helped to stimulate intra-state conflict (Singer 2008:54), and the mass demobilisation of national troops who have gone on to become involved in conflict in weaker states (Singer 2008:38). Alongside these developments has been the increased outsourcing of traditional government functions that have in turn sparked debate around constitutional issues in the case of private security (Avant and Sigelman 2009). In response to the industry's exponential growth, scholars have debated the consequences of loosening the states monopoly on violence (Mandel 2002; Singer 2008), the industry's overall legitimacy (Holmqvist 2005; Leander 2005), concerns of identity and professionalism amongst the contracting workforce (Franke 2009; Higate 2012), international and historical norms governing the use of mercenaries (Percy 2007), the role of security in contemporary politics and world order (Kinsey 2007; Abrahamsen and Williams 2010) and finally, different national attitudes to the privatization of security (Krahmann 2010). The majority of security contractors have backgrounds in regular armed forces and carry out a wide range of tasks including convoy security, close protection of dignitaries, hostage negotiation, static guarding of civilian and military installations, training of local personnel as part of security sector reform, provision of logistical and support functions to military peacekeeping, combat operations and alleged support for an assassination program (Kinsey 2007; Leander 2009, 2009a). Taken together, the roles of armed contractors and those in related roles provided for the

employment of 207,600 individuals working for the U.S Department of Defense alone, across both Iraq and Afghanistan (Schwartz 2010). Whether or not these (mainly) men have military expertise in training, logistics or the teeth arms, to varying degrees they hold in common proficiency in the use of legitimate violence. This proficiency ranges from the ability to kill face-to-face with bare hands, through to the effective use of weapons including knives, rifles and pistols. Yet, while PMSCs have been problematised as a political concern through invoking questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, accountability and the state's monopoly on violence, focus on the macro-level, structural aspects of the industry have occluded the institutional-corporeal terrain of the contracting workforce.² In registering this lacuna around the body then, I argue that veteran's corporeal conditioning is a political matter since its longer term legacy - a durable somatic memory (Van der Kolk 1994) - has been imbued with an exchange value not seen since the existence of large scale mercenary armies prior to states' development of national militaries. Soldierly embodiment can be seen as vital to the modern day market for force (Avant 2005) and its corollary, contemporary geopolitical imperatives manifest in the presence of tens of thousands of contractors working in Iraq and Afghanistan largely for the benefit of Western capital interests. Framed in normative terms then, this militarized and privatized workforce are of great import to processes of accumulation through dispossession (Harvey 2005), underscored most clearly in the invasion and subsequent corporatized occupation of Iraq.

Towards a Politics of the (Violent) Body?

Contractors constitute an exemplary corporeal community next only to soldiers in their expert use of violence. This aspect of their bodily capital has been alluded to by industry commentators who have at times written of the hypermasculine physicality of some contractors. For example, the adventurist journalist Robert Young Pelton's experiences in Iraq's Green Zone with Blackwater contractors leads him to reflect on one of the men he lived alongside as 'square jawed and built low ... Pete resembles a real-life, white skinned version of the Incredible Hulk' (Young Pelton 2006:75). Or, the observation from another journalist that contractors dedicate considerable effort to creating warrior bodies, where 'at night they return to the Green Zone ... the only releases are working out in the gym – with many also using steroids' (Judd 2009:1). However, a sustained, in-depth focus on bodies, or at least a consideration of bodily paradigms developed in sociology, human geography and cultural studies, remains absent from the scholarship on PMSCs. On the few occasions that bodies do appear in the PMSC literature, they are implicitly conceived of in regard to an unfettered agency through Cartesian, individualist and liberal humanist terms – as objects of the mind, bereft of sentience that contractors have and use freely. Persistence of this dualistic mind-body approach can be traced to the epistemological and ontological perspectives dominating security studies, IR and political science more widely that in turn, inform the scholarship on PMSCs. Here, utilitarian vantage points, rational choice and methodological individualism shape the mainstream (Gusterson 1998:101-130; Coole 2005; 2006; Jenkins 2005; Kessler 2011:90). Psychologistic perspectives also dominate the work of military sociologists who, it might be presumed, given the institution's role in the production of individuals' expert in the use of violence would have generated a canon of insightful work on the soldierly body. Yet, even here we note the proliferation of Cartesian approaches manifest in a preference for the rational actor rather than those that engage the corporeal, affective or non-

rational aspects of agency (Ben Ari 1996:6; Ouellet 2005; Higate and Cameron 2006; Lande 2007:96).

Critical commentators positioned on the margins of IR have however, considered the body through revealing the normalised means by which violence has been framed in the discipline as ‘illegitimate [and referring to] anything we do not like’ (Thomas 2010:22). Those instances when the violence/body nexus has been discussed explicitly in contrast to its neglect in the mainstream have shown, for example how processes of racialisation can determine who lives and who dies (Milliken and Sylvan 1996:343). Similarly, feminist’s critical engagements with the corporeal have taught us a great deal about racialised and heteronormative power in respect of the female body in its international context (Cohn 1987; Moon 1997; Hyndman 2004). More broadly, Pettman (1997:94) argues that:

‘Political Science and IR grew largely safe from the mess, pain, pleasure and desire of actual bodies – though at times in language which suggested pleasure and danger were just a word away’.

Elaine Scarry’s (1985) work on torture, war and the end of language represents a further attempt to show the making and unmaking of the political in ways that overcome ‘scientism’s ability to hide the body’s subjectivity, pain and personhood’ (Gusterson 1998:110). Underscoring the distance of both mainstream scholars and members of the power elite from the body, is the following question posed by Milliken and Sylvan (1996:323) who ask ‘how can mere words compete with the scent of cordite and the sight of blood?’ They continue, ‘Presidents ... do not ... get the chance to ... throw prisoners out of helicopters, or collect body parts as trophies.’ The

tactic of denial through euphemism is registered with considerable insight through ethnographic research into nuclear scientist's sub-culture (Gusterson 1998), and more recently, through the notion of hygienic war perpetrated through killing at a distance (der Derian 2001). In regard to the former - nuclear scientists - the following has wider applicability to those writing about, or dealing with violence in their occupational lives

‘[They] pay little attention to representations of the body or to bodily practices. Instead, they focus on the working of ... metaphor in language, on the tactical manipulation of discourse, and on phenomena of repression, denial and disidentification, that are described as psychological’ (Gusterson 1998:102).

In their attempt to highlight the body's political significance (Hayles 1999:5), these critical scholars have revealed the role of euphemism in numerous spheres from state policy through to the academe. These efforts however, have still to make their presence felt in anything other than a peripheral way in intellectual, political and media narrative. To illustrate: the absent presence of the body is exemplified on those occasions in which bodies obliterated through war and subsequently shown in their visceral frailty are considered taboo and in turn, incite vituperative response. The grisly media images of the mummified, severely burned Iraqi tank driver from the 1991 Gulf War on the ‘Highway of Death’ linking Kuwait and Basra is a case in point and underscores the subversive potential of showing war's reality (Gusterson 1998:104). While important, critical approaches to the body and violence have tended to overlook corporeality's phenomenological aspect, together with what this might mean for a fleshy mode of political agency nested in and of the sentient body (though see Coole 2005, 2006 and Jenkins 2005). This omission also extends to Foucault who, while widely understood to have made a significant

contribution to revealing the body's significance to social life through raising questions of power, discipline and surveillance (including a focus on soldierly corporeality; see Foucault 1979), was only partially influenced by phenomenological thought. Through acknowledging the body's agency in his later work as it challenged the discursive powers of its constitution (Sassoon Levy 2008:299), Foucault nonetheless invokes a dualism between subject and object by 're-describ[ing] the "inter" in terms of practice [and] discourse' (Kessler 2011:90). In contrast, Caraccioli (2011:99) asserts that embodiment prefigures our experience of the world through stressing the significance of approaches that conceive of the body in its non-dualistic, phenomenological dimension. This conceptual point of departure allows us to grasp the body-subject, the conceptual implications of which require that 'the body be understood as the existential ground of culture – not as an object that is good to think, but as a subject that is necessary to be' (Csordas 1993:135). Understanding embodiment in this way is necessary but not sufficient for analysis that sees bodies trained in violence as inseparable from the abstracted political structures typically conceived of in isolation from them, and to which discussion now turns in respect of the first of two elements of the analytical framework of geocorporeality developed in this paper.

Analytical Framework: Geocorporeality

The concept of geocorporeality is contingent on two analytical moves. In the first, it is premised on rethinking the connections between typically reified units of analyses or abstract scaffolding (Caraccioli 2011:98). These link the everyday/embodied with the international/geopolitical, and while these realms are 'often seen as distinct [and] fixed in a hierarchical relationship' (Basham

2012:25), the aim here is to move from bifurcation towards seamless unity. In so doing it is possible to bring into sharp relief the flows that constitute, and are constitutive of everyday social relations and practices (Caraccioli 2010:88). Approaches eschewing reification of the local/international advanced here have guided other scholars on the fringes of Political Science including those with an ethnographic sensitivity to IR (Dowler and Sharp 2001; de Volo and Schatz 2004; Vastri 2008). The general observation that empire is in the detail (Lutz 2006) resonates throughout the work of these scholars; put succinctly 'it is within the small details of people's lives that lurk some of the most potent geopolitical forces by which the geopolitical is translated into being' (Thrift 2000:380/384). Drawing on Pain and Smith's (2008) model of a double helix where the everyday and the international are shown as intertwined, Basham outlines attempts to locate the corporeal dimension of flows that 'are overlapping at multiple junctures ... this entails tracing the ... bodies ... that conjoin them' (Basham 2012:27). Ultimately then, it is the phenomenological awareness of ties between the immensity of the global and the intimately tiny through which the body-in-space can be said to be experientially linked to IR theorist's concerns (Caraccioli 2011:99), or put rather less prosaically, it is the material infrastructure of (soldier's) bodies that are linked to the state (Sassoon-Levy 2008). In turn this brings us to the second analytical move vital for the concept of geocorporeality that depends on seeing the body-subject in its phenomenological aspect.

Geocorporeality and a Phenomenology of the Body

Guided by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) classic post-Cartesian work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the second dimension of geocorporeality posits a phenomenological understanding of the actor,

and further develops his thinking by keeping in view the significance of embodiment to the geopolitical realm. Merleau-Ponty understands the senses, motility and consciousness as undifferentiated elements of actors 'condemned to meaning' in a world in which they are already present and engaged in a perpetual condition of experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962:xix). This phenomenological approach to corporeality he asserts, has 'united extreme objectivism and extreme subjectivism in its notion of ... rationality' in the form of a body-subject (Merleau-Ponty 1962:xix). Bodies are in a constant state of knowing, and 'to look at an object is to inhabit it' through pre-conscious transpositions of space and time that provide for body-subjects to skilfully negotiate their everyday worlds (Merleau-Ponty 1962:68). This is the practical magic of a body-subject (Merleau-Ponty 1962:94/111) derived from the pre-reflective realm where actors can forget their bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962:71) to the extent that the body becomes a highly polished machine (Merleau-Ponty 1962:76). Habit bridges the external, objective world with conditioning such that there 'no longer exists any contradiction between them ... [for body-subjects to exist] there is a necessity for the habitual body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 87). This phenomenological conceptualisation of the body offers 'a vantage point ... which takes us closer to political phenomena' (Jacobi 2011:87) through a focus on 'the experiential unity ... of bodies' (Caraccioli 2011:98) as sites of agency. Thus, bodies are more than abstract appendages or benign adjuncts to social practice that contain cognition. Rather, they are unfinished projects (Shilling 1997:217) that have a life of their own, with their sentience going beyond the blood, flesh, tissue, bone and skin of which they are comprised. Not only is the body understood to be the very basis of human subjectivity, but it is also intersubjective in relation to its social and material worlds, exemplified by the ways in which bodies are expert in mastering a myriad of practical, choreographed competencies (Crossley 1995:44-45). Given Merleau-Ponty's insights,

attention now turns to the specificities of the contractor as body-subject in order to ‘trace [his] emergent and constituent capacities [through] a careful reading of embodied events and trajectories’ (Coole 2005:132). This is done in regard to the proficiency in violence subsequently commodified in the PMSC.

Militarizing the Body through Dispositional Tendency

Discussing soldiers, but of relevance to actors more broadly, Walker (2010:252) asserts that the body has no

‘neutral demeanour independent of physical and social milieu and so ought to be treated as part of social practices in which corporeal styles ... are made relevant, visible, and normal.’

Though armed forces’ physical training regimes vary in duration and intensity, men and women exposed to their institutional-embodied vicissitudes nevertheless ‘become something different ... [since they must] incorporate into their own flesh [pre-objective] habits and capacities’ (Lande 2007:100). While limited, interest in soldierly corporeality from a phenomenological perspective has stressed the processes by which military recruits are worked-on by entrepreneurs in bodily capital, including Physical Training Instructors and all manner of superiors and soldiers themselves (Higate 2000; Hockey 2002; 2009; Lande 2007; Walker 2010). These individuals aim to reconfigure (the civilian) body-subject towards the functional imperative of military objectives – for those in the teeth arms this means closing with and killing the enemy. These embodied processes necessarily

‘bring to prominence certain organs and abilities ... making others recede, transforming not only the physique ... but also (his) “*body sense*,” the consciousness he has of his organism and, through this changed body, of the world around him’ (Wacquant 1995:73; *emphasis added*).

Soldiers are required to develop corporeal repertoires capable of enactment under conditions of great stress and temporal pressure, with a significant number becoming expert in the use of weaponry as key elements of their martial becoming (Brighton 2011:104). Embodied responses oriented towards the death of the enemy, or alternatively protection of self and peer, rapidly reach the status of latent disposition residing in, and central to the practical accomplishments of these body-subjects. Whilst important not to over-determine the impact of combat training, regimes are broadly constitutive of bodies inhering with a militarized agency in the form of a highly specialized, pre-reflective bodily capital where ‘the social construction of meaning ... is harrowed into the very skin of the participants’ (Narvaez 2006:57), and as such, stands as the initial unfolding of an embodied trajectory making possible the exponential growth of the PMSC industry. Yet, to talk of the political relevance of the (military) conditioned contractor as body-subject, it is necessary to examine the substantive character of the flows and connections configuring the geocorporeal context of which he is an integral element.

Context: Iraq as Geocorporeal Moment

The campaign of shock and awe and subsequent allied occupation of Iraq in 2003 is understood by critical scholars to have come from a constellation of interlocking factors (Herring and Rangwala 2006:7-13). The political-economic conditions of the country in the immediate

aftermath of George Bush's now infamous appearance on the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* in 2003 to declare that 'combat operations were over', and that 'the U.S and her allies had prevailed' further excited the already vibrant PMSC industry. Against the backdrop of poor, if non-existent post-war planning born of naivety, the hubris of Empire and the misguided attempt at de-Baathification of the former regime of Saddam Hussein, the Army and Police services were dissolved, thereby creating a security vacuum into which stepped a ruthlessly effective insurgency (Chandrasekaran 2007). Noted to buck wider trends in stock markets, the conditions under which the value of the private security sector grew at this time were made possible by the availability and willingness of individuals trained in the legitimate discharge of violence – veterans - to exploit, and be exploited by neo-liberal forces. As the industry has increasingly supplanted activities carried out by national militaries, so its importance to security governance has evolved in parallel. Indeed, the PMSC industry has a new and growing significance to intervention in conflict and post-conflict contexts to the extent that it has been argued to influence foreign policy (Isenberg 2008). Given that not anyone will do as a contractor, veteran bodies in particular have become significant nodes of security's neo-liberalisation reaching their apogee in the armed convoy protection role. What does a focus on these political processes reveal about the specific geocorporeal dimensions of the industry's development in the illustrative case of Iraq?

'He's a Good Lad' – Iraq and the Industry's Geocorporeal Genesis

The so-called Iraq gold rush peaked as it became clear that the insurgency required security services on a scale hitherto unimagined:

‘It had started small, a byproduct of all the mistakes at the beginning: not enough troops, ignoring the insurgency, starting the reconstruction prematurely. Soon they [contractors] were everywhere: guarding the diplomats, the generals, military bases the size of small cities and thousands of supply convoys filled with guns and ammunition and food.

Suddenly no one and no thing could move around Iraq without them’ (Fainaru 2008:22).

From around the autumn of 2003, companies proliferated at an astonishing rate and in order to meet demand, the number of contractors snowballed as, through word of mouth, veterans were recruited *en-masse* to The Circuit (Shepherd, 2008). A significant proportion that came on recommendation were former colleagues, or from the same (mainly) army backgrounds to those already in-country. To be recommended as a good lad in these times of high demand was frequently a passport to security contracting and is a statement worthy of further consideration. Good lads are unlikely to be occupationally incompetent, but in contrast, accomplished and experienced operators since they inhere with a proven range of embodied dispositions recognizable to colleagues and constitutive of a corporeal community bound together through mutual trust (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Giddens 1984; Csordas 1993; Crossley 1995; Coole 2005, 2006; Hockey 2009). In parallel to saying he’s a good (military) cadet, members of the contracting community were ‘referring [in-part] to a stable set of features of the soldier’s body ... durable across a variety of settings’ (Lande 2007:97). Veterans migrated to Iraq for a range of reasons. Some came to escape unemployment in their home countries, many lured by high wages exited the military, and yet others were explicit in their desire to rekindle the adrenaline-filled experiences of serving in a war zone (Franke 2009:12). For the majority however, it provided the opportunity to reinvigorate unspoken masculinised camaraderie rooted in body-subjects trained

in violence, and to an extent, an important element of the ontologically secure (Laing 1967; Giddens 1987) embodied soldierly habitus (Arkin and Dobrovsky 1976; Hockey 1986, Morgan 1992, 1994; Hutchings 2008; Franke 2009). Here, a former British army soldier expresses sentiments held by many in the contractor community

“When the army kicks you out at a youthful forty or so, what else do you do? Finding a ... civilian job is very hard. All the experience you have, whilst transferable, is in a language and working environment that is totally alien to the majority ...” (cited in Geraghty 2007:15).

In turn these body-subjects may well have experienced anomie where embodied disposition central to previous being, meaning and identity was rendered irrelevant on discharge from the military. The civilian environment is generally less risky than operational theatres and bodily appearance and bearing of particular military kinds of decreased relevance (Walker 2010:256). As such, the kinds of employment open to those with proficiency in the teeth arms and with few technical skills is limited (Higate 2000), with marketable embodied disposition focused on competence in the legitimate discharge of violence key to the industry’s genesis. Some firms offered the opportunity for veterans to make use of their military combat skills, and as one commentator put it more broadly in regard to a number of U.S veterans who went on to become contractors

‘When they do leave the war zone, they often return home and find themselves walking in circles. Nothing seems to make them happy or content. They’ve lived on the edge for

too long and now find it hard to cope with regular life. It sounds strange, but many head back to the war zone not for the money, but for the experience of closeness with fellow human beings [men] and that special camaraderie that comes from facing danger together on a daily basis' (Schumacher 2006:45).

It can be argued that a number of contractors inhabit the world through a bodily schema they have largely failed to reclaim in a civilian sense (Walker 2010), and that their migration to the industry is more than a matter of the ubiquitous overly decisionist actor noted in IR theory (Michel 2011:91). For some, former experiences could have been over-determined by the experience of combat as

'the most exciting interesting and thrilling game there is and one in which it is perfectly legitimate to look for these things ... the feeling of the adrenaline flowing [in combat] is a good feeling' (Ben Ari 1998:22/96).

And for others – in this case a former U.S soldier:

'Civilian life is so slow ... it's hard. You don't have that day-to-day adrenaline. Everything that goes through your mind is, I've got to do something different. Maybe I can do something more dangerous' (Miller and Zwerdling 2011).

As Sassoon Levy (2008:302) also notes, 'thrill plays an important role both in the discourse the army uses to lure men into soldiering and in the narratives of soldiers themselves' thereby underscoring the role of unintended, embodied consequence as it pertains to the geopolitics of Iraq and this exemplary geocorporeal moment. However, what of the actors themselves? How far and in what kinds of ways do contractor's own reflections support the proposition that soldierly

embodiment has shaped the emergence of the PMSC industry in its post 2003 manifestation in Iraq? Attention now turns to the first of two empirical sections drawing on data derived from contractor memoirs that, quite literally, seek to flesh out geocorporeality from the body-subjects themselves.

Voices of the Geocorporeal

A former Special Air Service (SAS) Warrant Officer reflected on the long term legacy of the skill sets he developed whilst in the British Army, bequeathed through training to contractors following him in Iraq. These skills included:

‘Standard operating procedures or SOP’s ... [involving particular] ways of moving through country ... ways of responding to attack, drills for regrouping – a whole set of life-saving rules that have become a survival manual in a forest of terror’ (Geddes 2006:460).

SOP’s, moving through hostile territory, responding to attack and regrouping (Keegan 1976:70; Holmes 1986:42) are not simply matters of the mind, but rather, engage the military trained body-subject where instantaneous response turns centrally on the pre-reflective realm of social practice (Merleau-Ponty 1962:82). This is particularly the case for drills, discussed widely in the data and now considered further.

Body-Subjects and Weapon’s Drill as Private Good

One of the few previously commissioned veterans working on the ground in Iraq commented on the professionalism of British Army training through invoking the importance of drill:

‘[We had] the experience and training [to deal with] with counter-insurgency and guerrilla tactics. It was good to know that I would be (a) doing work I was good at and (b) working with people who were just as good. We agreed on several “action on” and drills we should train in’ (Ashcroft 2007:55).

Invoking the experiencing and practical body, he went on to say that ‘good security [required] prior preparation, planning and drills combined with training, stamina, shooting practice, intuition, an eye for detail and physical strength’ (Ashcroft 2007:20). As Ben-Ari puts it ‘a great deal of time is devoted to ... drills ... these drills involve set patterns of movement ... professional soldier are expected to reach a high level of automaticity in carrying them out’ (Ben-Ari 1998: 38). Put in phenomenological terms, drills are

‘not a matter of “I think” ... but rather “I can” ... the “I” is misleading in this phrase because it suggests ... the reflective and reflexive subject ... but the “can” clearly conveys ... understanding that our primary relation to our environment consists in practical competence’ (Crossley 1995:53).

Quite literally, veteran contractor flesh and tissue was primed for action in ways that fostered a conservative agency through ‘embodied rituals that act as a reservoir of sedimented memories ... lending coherence to social life’ (Coole 2005:130). Highlighting one of the five senses - touching, expertise here called for contractors to mobilise a highly specialized haptic repertoire, as noted in the following:

‘The Browning [revolver] was easier to manoeuvre from a covert position when taking on a close target, although I could also bring the AK-47 quickly into play if required. I was on max alert with no time or thought for anything but my immediate surroundings’ (Low 2008:258).

As Hockey puts it in respect of British Army infantry recruits more generally, but with pertinence to the contractor:

‘such drills are ... designed to effect particular bodily practices ... these ... drills are learned and executed under temporal pressure for the quicker ... the drill, the greater the chance of surviving the conflict situation’ (Hockey 2002:156).

In common to many contractors, down-time was filled with lengthy drill rehearsal, and as noted by one individual ‘I sat down on a ... chair and began my contact action drills ... I repeated the drill several times over, watching, as it were, from outside myself ...’ (Low 2008:245). He continued, stating that ‘drills must be an automatic reflex ... [using] the same robotic movement’ and went on to recall the words of an army weapons training instructor who had told him that ‘if the lesson was both simple and dynamic it would be burned into your memory for ever’ (Low 2008:245).

‘Switching On’ for Cash: Somatic Modes of Attention

At the kernel of combat effectiveness is the need for soldiers to switch on, to shift into a specific mode of situational awareness through consciously and pre-reflectively attuning the body-subject to its immediate and therefore, preempted environment (Merleau-Ponty 1962:147; Hockey

2002:161). For example, one contractor in Iraq recalled the moment he readied his team for a dangerous convoy protection run, ‘everyone and everything was now set. The engines of the Toyotas fired up, we did one last check and then we were off ... I shouted “Heads up, lads” ... all the guys switched on’ (Mercer 2009:37). Preparing the body-subject in this manner called for the ‘close observation of potential threats in the immediate area, combined with as much forward planning and anticipation as possible’ (Ashcroft 2007:8). Making a similar point, a British contractor stated that ‘you may only call upon it for relatively short, frantic and intense periods of time but it may save your life. It’s called situation awareness’ (Geddes 2006:62). Somatic modes of attention in the world of the soldier and contractor require that ‘bodies in close proximity are keenly attended to’ (Csordas, 1993: 139) emphasizing that practice (whether the use of weapons or other) is choreographed with others in time and space (Merleau-Ponty 1962:79), thereby helping to forge a corporeal camaraderie through shared muscle memory. Also of relevance for contractors was their embodied military ways of seeing that fostered a suspicious gaze honed during their time as soldiers. Here, contractors discussed what Hockey describes as infantrymen’s ‘ocular focus ... [that required] locating the enemy before contact occurs ... the vision taught and produced is a highly suspicious one’ (Hockey 2009:483).

In moving from concerns of the industry’s emergence made possible by contractor’s embodied continuity, the second line of empirical enquiry explicitly considers contractor visibility through the geocorporeal lens. How might veteran body-subjects experience of particular national military cultures play out in the profiles of their security work?

Security and the Geocorporeality of Embodied Presentation

An excerpt from the author's fieldwork diary from Afghanistan on research into contractor identity, follows:

Disembarking with some relief from the rather dilapidated Boeing 737 into the blistering heat of a Kabul afternoon, I seek out Masoon my driver who waits in a car park adjacent to the airport. As I navigate my way on foot through the various other car parks en-route to Masoon, I am confronted by small groups of private security contractors who have come to meet their colleagues from the flight. They are invariably clustered around armoured Toyota Land Cruisers and are chatting amongst themselves. Prior to the trip I had read extensively of contractors, viewed DVD and YouTube clips of them, and also written of these individuals, though all at a distance. Seeing contractors 'in the flesh' validated much of what I had learned. To a man, they were tall, well built, and stood with arms folded, back straight, head-up and legs shoulder-width apart. Without exception, the contractors sported expensive sunglasses, many had goatee beards, and from accent, I surmised that those with particular designs of tattoo were former British army soldiers (Kabul, 19th June 2010).

Later in the same entry, it is noted that:

I've also noticed other guys - scruffy, unshaven, unassuming types, climbing into knackered Toyota Corollas. They are clearly not locals ... who are they? My curiosity is piqued (Kabul, 19th June 2010).

Inhering within these observations lurk elements of a key geocorporeal character of the industry: the difference between high and low profile body-subjects that can be seen as politically

ambiguous (Coole, 2005: 132) in regard to their impact on security. Though tending not to use the technical language of high versus low profile,³ there has been an understandable preoccupation with the consistently aggressive, high profile stance of a small but not insignificant number of contractors in regard to the negative impact they exert on host populations, documented extensively in Iraq (Scahill 2007). For many observers outside of the industry, *all* contractors are viewed in this way as a consequence of what might be termed the ‘Blackwater effect’ involving ‘gun slinging cowboys’ (Franke 2009: 13) who are perceived to be quick on the trigger as noted in the 2007 Nisour Square massacre in Baghdad where members of a Blackwater security detail killed 17 Iraqi civilians, and injured many more. Most importantly, contractors tend to be imbued with the pre-reflective military ethos of their former experiences that have given rise to a wide range of specialist services including those requiring low profile approaches. Ultimately, how contractor bodies appear to members of the host population is a political matter and can be explained by shifting emphasis from a phenomenological perspective that focuses on the body as *site* of transformation, to a concern with the *sight* of the contractor through the representational aspects of security practice.

Security through Intimidation? The Sight of the ‘Cowboy’ Contractor

Legion in Iraq from 2003, high profile performances informed by the infamous Blackwater look were most often found in convoy protection duties. Adopting a high profile, hard-stance turned on the presentation of impressive body size as the result of many hours working-out in the gym and/or use of steroids, as indicated. Body size was further enhanced by wearing bulky Kevlar body armour, kneepads and helmets. In extreme examples, high profile presentations also

included the props of hunting knives strapped to improvised uniforms, modification of ammunition, and carrying one or more automatic weapons with trick scopes (Higate 2012). In this way, the embodiment of militarised masculinity is afforded considerable importance as noted by one U.S contractor who said “I guess, if the truth be known, when you put all that equipment on, the testosterone just ekes through your pores” (cited in Schumacher 2006:74). Integral to intimidation (or perhaps for some members of the host population, reassurance), was the sight of the heavily armoured Sports Utility Vehicles (SUV) used by particular companies. In some cases these vehicles were packed with automatic weaponry, at least some of which pointed menacingly out of windows and were capable of sustaining their occupants in a protracted fire-fight. Commenting on the high profile approach that tends to be associated with U.S companies, a British contractor interviewed in Afghanistan noted somewhat ironically ‘these guys have all the gear but no idea’, with another demeaning this practice through its connotation to homosexuality, by stating ‘we call it “queer gear”.’ Defending the high profile approach, a U.S commentator stated:

‘To a man they would shoot to kill in the blink of an eye ... while parts of the world consider this look to be that of the quintessential “arrogant American”, security contractors consider it part of security through intimidation and an important aspect of their safety. An imposing and confident appearance is more likely to give insurgents pause ... it doesn’t win many friends in international circles, but contractors swear by it. In their view it gets the job done’ (Schumacher, 2006: 123).

Whether or not security through intimidation gives insurgents pause or stimulates insecurity can be understood through consideration of its geocorporeal character. According to one journalist, recently released Wikileaks documents:

‘seem to confirm a common observation on the ground during those years in Iraq: far from providing insurance against sudden death, the easily identifiable ... pickup trucks and SUVs driven by the security companies were magnets for insurgents, militias, disgruntled Iraqis and anyone else in search of a target’ (Glanz and Lehren 2010).

Either way, it is clear that the manner in which body-subjects are presented can influence the security mood or climate on the ground, a finding mirroring the situation in UN and NATO peacekeeping operations (Higate and Henry 2009).

Losing Sight of the Contractor: Low Profile Approaches

At the other end of the spectrum was evidence of altogether more discrete body-subjects noted during field research in Afghanistan that can be explained by a focus on embodied trajectory. Here, a mixture of in-depth interviews and observation revealed the very different role of the low profile body-subject, of whom many were noted to have a background in the UK’s Special Air Service (SAS). For example, rather than ‘hitting the ground running ... with all guns blazing’, one former SAS contractor explained that he spent the first 6 weeks in-country ‘chilling ... observing’ and ‘tuning into the vibe’. This observational period provided for an appraisal of the local embodied landscape, where body language was scrutinised and intuitively assimilated into the corporeal repertoires of the contractor’s everyday, security practice. Examples included the use of local, gendered body language that was gestured to the author during interview and included the ability to smoke in a particular way. This involved mimicking local Afghan men who, when sat in their cars, had a tendency to extend an arm out of the window, lean their head

to one side and draw nonchalantly on a cigarette. Or it could mean adopting impromptu and partial disguises where the car's sun visor is used to obscure the top half of the face as one awaits passage through a vehicle check point. Dressing in a shemagh as a local was also discussed, as was ensuring that weapons were hidden from view at all times. These dynamic and contingent embodied repertoires turned on unthreatening, passing presentations of masculine selves that depended on the acquisition of local knowledge (Goffman, 1968). Passing also necessitated a conscious controlling of emotions, where in a mixed affect/body metaphor alluding to masculine identity, 'pride may have to be swallowed' as one respondent put it when negotiating verbal abuse from local militia controlling a vehicle check point. In regard to the rigours of working in hostile territories more generally, another discussed attempts to contain a flustered body (Goffman, 1968: 100) surging with fear, adrenaline and anticipation. In another example, the contractor recalls waiting in his vehicle at a check point in a village deemed to be suicidal for Westerners. Shortly after he was approached by 'a Talab',⁴ and by the time the AK47 wielding man reached his car and was bending down to get a closer look at its occupant, the contractor had his finger on the trigger of a small-arm hidden under a newspaper on the passenger seat. He stated how he was 'pissing with sweat' and 'fucking scared'. His demeanour however, was one of (albeit perspiration-soaked) calm, and after a brief look at the contractor who replied with a generous smile, the man continued down the line of traffic. Through strength of will as he put it, the contractor masked his body-subject's high state of arousal and presented an exterior at odds with its internal state in ways that resonate with the soldiers cultivation of the 'cool spirit' (Ben-Ari 1998:44), and with ambiguous political ramifications for host populations who were likely unaware of his presence. As the former SAS Warrant Officer Bob Shepherd explains:

‘the key to operating successfully as a security advisor in Iraq or practically any other hostile environment; remain as inconspicuous as possible. Drive an unremarkable vehicle, conceal weapons, wear body armour underneath clothing’ (Shepherd 2008:113-114).

In contrast to the high profile approach, a former special forces soldier working in a low profile role said ‘think de-escalation and restraint ... move slowly ... stay calm and keep your wits about you ... you won’t go far wrong’.

Discussion and Concluding Comments

Developing a phenomenology of the body approach using the concept of geocorporeality that conceives of the body in its undifferentiated relationship to the wider political context has provided an original theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature on PMSCs and more widely, to IR and Political Science. Specifically, this perspective has addressed embodied elements of the ‘antinomies and aporias’ produced by the ‘ontological “split” between the thinking subject and the objective world’ (Michel, 2011: 99). Consequently, and of considerable importance to debates on PMSCs, framing the contractor as geocorporeal actor has implications for conceptions of agency that forge new and radical lines of enquiry, including challenging the truism that veterans are best suited to employment in the industry, discussed below. And, proceeding from contractor’s everyday, embodied experience as it is embedded within the geopolitical realm are the wider implications of foregoing discussion that raise questions of actor intentionality and responsibility (Jacobi 2011:87; Michel 2011:99).

Intentionality, Responsibility and the Contractor as (Militarised) Body-Subject

The industry's generation of insecurity noted to be a key point of concern for scholars and practitioners alike, should be seen in the first instance not as a problem to be resolved decisively through industry self-regulatory initiatives turning, for example on the much vaunted 2011 International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers (ICoC) and its brief section dealing with 'The Use of Force', but rather as a phenomenological reality requiring better understanding of contractors' embodied social practice through the development of explanatory concepts – in this case geocorporeality - from the thing itself (Kessler 2011). Here, geocorporeality draws attention to the complex and nuanced character of embodied human agency in its inseparable international/local aspects where recourse to utility maximising (Kessler 2011:89) perspectives are noted to inhere within industry rules and regulations, to which it is assumed contractors will respond rationally. As we have argued however, like combatants, contractors 'are not simply bare life units of strategic calculation but are also [embodied] repositories of meaning' (Brighton 2011:102), and while regulation is to be welcomed, attempts to modify the social practice of trigger happy or high profile contractors who unsettle, injure or kill member of the host population, depends on more than 'idealized forms of corporeal being ... [as] ways of life [able to be] informed by international law' (Caraccioli 2011:100). The ICoC is but a blunt instrument of reform since it is ill-equipped to fully grasp the experiential realities and legacies of military conditioning underscored in vague recommendations for the further training of contractors, for example. As indicated then, embodied trajectories may shape contractor intentionality by bringing into sharp relief the embodied limits of human selfhood (Caraccioli, 2011: 99). Contractors surging with adrenaline who respond inappropriately on account of pre-reflective disposition, are not those implicitly conceived of in the ICoC as 'Western subject[s] of

modernity – a subject that champions abstractions over embodiment through its ability to be sovereign, self-sufficient, and universal’ (Caraccioli 2011:99). Rather, the tendency for some to over-react could be explained by the inability to deploy a calculus of means and ends (Michel, 2011: 92) to their work as a consequence of embodied self-hood. Similarly, and of pertinence to those seeking explanations for random shootings by contractors, Michael J. Shapiro talks of the inarticulacy of militarized bodies ‘which either refuse to or are incapable of replying to the questions concerning war asked by civilians’ (Armitage 2003:7).

Raising questions about the limits of embodied self-hood in the case of those trained to use violence also brings into view the politically ambiguous dimensions of security profile. For example, embodied disposition towards low-profile stances in the case of those trained according to this specific ethos (members of the SAS for example), whilst arguably less intimidating for members of the host population, may actually hide from view those contractors who commit misdemeanours. In turn, the prestige of certain companies able to claim professionalism on account of their contractors light footprint could – ultimately – bolster market share and allow the interests of governments for those companies working in the national interest, to go relatively undetected (Higate, 2012). Whilst this may be the case, what of the other implications of geocorporeal analysis in respect of actor responsibility?

Discussing the work of Merleau-Ponty and its relevance to conceptions of human agency, Russon (1994:298) has argued that what is needed is a phenomenology of responsibility that avoids the binary framing of unrealistic voluntarism on the one hand and paralysing fatalism on the other (Coole 2005:125). Yet, responsibility for the killing of unarmed others is surely to be

found in the *intent* of individuals and groups that carry out such atrocities who must be held to account. Responsibility, however can be seen as a social construct that resonates most strongly with the realms of law and justice where some legal/social systems have no concept of individual responsibility, but rather assign misdeeds to the collective – for example, the clan, family and so on (Melton 1995). In other contexts, misdeeds are framed as taboo violation to be expunged ritually. As is the case with intentionality, the wellspring of responsibility is typically considered to be the mind, within the context of rational actors constructed through notions of premeditation, mental function, deliberation, intent and - in respect of defence for murder – insanity. With its roots in the modernist *episteme*, criminal justice's Cartesian mind-body dualism constitutes the actor as a voluntaristic decision maker whose ideas of agency have fused 'phenomenal processes – such as consciousness, meaning-generation ... reflexivity, will' into the 'unified ... figure of the ontological individual' (Coole 2005:128). This conception of agency resonates with the subject of law in the developed polities, and does in a limited way recognise perpetrator's emotional state where diminished responsibility is sometimes argued to influence culpability (Finkel and Parrott 2006). In moral and philosophical terms however, the question of how far contractors as body-subjects of particular kinds should be held responsible for their actions is complex, and leads instead to a radical suggestion that circumvents the potential hazards of employing individuals with military combat backgrounds in the PMSC industry.

Building on the author's ethnographic field experience in the U.S in 2011 where he underwent training to work within the PMSC industry in an armed Close Protection (CP) role, the instructional staff reiterated the challenges they faced in transforming the social practices of those presenting with backgrounds in the combat arms. What they referred to as training scars

resonates directly with preceding discussion around the embodied legacy of military training and, given the choice between well-motivated, highly trained civilians (and often older) combat experienced veterans, they were – unusually in the industry – also open to employment of the former in private security, though space limits further discussion of what is undoubtedly a complex matter. A final justification for the potential (and undoubtedly controversial) suitability of civilians to the industry, who were implicitly framed by the training staff as (embodied) *tabula rasa*, was that the ethos of contractors – particularly those in the CP role – was not, as one instructor put it to stay and fight as soldiers are trained to do, but rather to ensure the safety of the client and remove him or her (along with the security detail) from the threat as quickly and effectively as possible. While the industry is in the firm grip of veterans from those on the ground through to managers and executives, the use of civilians and the need for compulsory training is unlikely to develop in anything but an *ad-hoc* and marginal fashion. In turn, questions of intentionality, responsibility and insecurity are likely to remain key to debates in the field, with the phenomenology of the body approach throwing new light on the future direction of the industry as it is understood through its geocorporeal character.

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² Henceforth, 'contractors' discussed solely as men. While it is important to acknowledge that there are a small number of female contractors working on the ground, they are not considered in this paper.

³ There are considerable complexities here with regard to how contractors (and companies) might interpret high and low profile approaches. These approaches arise from variables that include: company policy; national military background; concerns of health and safety; client preference; security climate and particular nature of mission.

⁴ A colloquialism for a 'Taliban fighter'.