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Making a Market for Risk: Private Security Expertise in Mexico City

My dissertation project examines the social implications of the proliferation of private security to cope with urban violence in Mexico. Based on ethnographic research in the booming security sector of Mexico City, my research focuses on private security entrepreneurs and how they define the needs and resolve the concerns of their clients, from everyday middle-class residents to officials of international corporations. Despite being seen as a natural response to urban insecurity, my dissertation indicates that far from inhibiting violence, the proliferation of private security and its experts, not only reorganizes social life around fear but generates new forms of violence. First, using the notion of “security risk” experts propel more comprehensive security measures, proliferating both lethal and non-lethal arms, thus normalizing violent protection in everyday life. Second, with the pluralization of violent actors, security entrepreneurs partner with the state and shape security provisions, both legally and illegally. By leveraging the permeability of the Mexican security apparatus and its authoritarian legacy, security entrepreneurs act as brokers to the state and other violent actors on behalf of powerful clients to yield private violence. Ultimately, my dissertation shows that despite being seen as a legitimate market solution to violence in Mexico, private security exacerbates violence through its constant expansion, and should be understood as a sophisticated and self-interested armed actor.