

Review of:

Miller, Wilbur R

A History of Private Policing in the United States

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A History of Private Policing in the United States is an engaging and wide-ranging account, which provides a comprehensive analysis of a variety of different forms of private policing from the nineteenth century to the present day. Wilbur R Miller, a Professor of History at Stony Brook University, USA, marshals a wide range of evidence from across the United States to highlight and analyse the range of organisations and individual practices encompassed by private policing. He does not focus solely on private policing, however, but continually highlights the interactions and connections between private and public policing.

Miller persuasively argues that the USA's specific social and political circumstances have created conditions conducive to particular forms of private policing. In particular, the diffused nature of political authority facilitated the rise of private detectives and patrolling forces to operate across the whole country, unrestricted as public police forces were and are by state and city jurisdictions. He also suggests that the strong democratic tradition led to the development of corrupt public police forces, which in turn drove dissatisfied citizens to form private police forces. While Miller does not argue that private policing is solely a US phenomenon, and indeed offers valuable comparisons with private policing in other countries, he does identify particular American conditions that have proved conducive to specific forms of private policing. This includes the prominence of self-defence as a right of US citizens, which Miller attributes to the centrality of individualism in the country's political ideology.

The work's significant value lies in its synthesis of a very wide range of different types of private policing. While we may assume that a work on private policing would examine private security and private detectives, Miller also devotes chapters to vigilantism, self-defence and private prisons. Miller's work is one of the first to bring together primary historical evidence and existing literature on all these forms of private policing into a single narrative. It is consequently an extremely valuable source for students and scholars of policing, crime, security and US history more widely who require an overview of private policing.

Following a short introduction, the work proceeds to examine a different type of private policing in each chapter. Under these broad categories, such as vigilante groups and private detectives, Miller analyses prominent examples, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Pinkerton Agency, and lesser-known groups from across the USA, mainly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He evidences and analyses the policing practices of different groups engaged in private policing through newspaper accounts, primary literature, and other scholarly sources. While some of the forms of private policing examined, such as strikebreaking, are rooted in specific historical contexts, other forms have significant implications for contemporary policing practices. For example, private security guards have a long historical precedent, but are also a significant component of the contemporary mixed economy of 'plural policing'. Miller's work provides valuable reflections on the implications of historical practices for the contemporary policing situation.

A History of Private Policing engages with a wide range of scholarship, and provides an important contribution to police history, and to security studies and criminology more widely. Miller builds on the work of Beverly Smith and Frank Morn in synthesising descriptions of a variety of different forms of private policing in the US. He also draws on scholarship on the specific forms of policing that he examines in detail, such as Richard Brown's work on vigilantism and self defence. This work is part of a wider growing interest in the history of private policing and security in different national contexts, with scholars such as Francis Dodsworth and David Churchill working on private policing and security in the UK. Miller has provided a valuable synthesis of a variety of different areas of private policing, and his work will be welcomed by those interested in policing, security, US history and criminology.

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