

Dirty Harry gone global?

On globalising policing and punitive impotence¹

By David Sausdal

Introduction

We did it! We got what we came for. The bad guys got sentenced to almost four years in prison, both of them. You should've seen how quickly the light in their eyes faded. They couldn't believe it. They were completely stunned. It was beautiful, let me tell you. It was a thing of beauty!

Danish Police Prosecutor, North Zealand, April 2015

These are the elated words of a police prosecutor employed at the Danish special police investigations unit, Task Force Burglary (TFB) – a unit which in 2015 was part of the North Zealand police district located north of Copenhagen. With a big celebratory smile on his face, the prosecutor had placed himself in front of the conference room's central table, around which the unit's 20 or so detectives were sitting. He had been showcasing his smile ever since the North Zealand criminal court had passed its verdict earlier that day on two burglars from Morocco. 'This was a good day', he had told me soon afterwards as we drove the short distance from the courthouse back to the police station. 'The guys back home are going to be very happy about this. Seriously, this is what we aim for. We want these criminals from outside Denmark to know that they're not going to get away with their crimes so easily and that the hammer of justice will be brought down hard. Let me tell you, that's the only way to stop these damn thieves coming to Denmark.' Listening quietly to his strong words, I nodded. And when later, as described above, he told his police colleagues at TFB the good news, I was there to witness their collective jubilation. Several detectives clapped and howled 'hell yeah!'. Obviously, this was good news and a good day at the office.

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This example originates from my ethnographic study of transnational policing and detective work in and around Denmark (Sausdal, 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; 2020b; 2021; Sausdal and Vigh, 2019). This was a study I commenced in 2015, and which currently includes more than 900 hours of observation with two special investigation units involved in the policing of what is often interchangeably termed ‘transnational’ or ‘cross-border’ crime, specifically focusing on what have come to be known as ‘mobile organised criminal groups’ (MOCGs) committing large-scale property crimes across Europe. As already explained, one of these units was Task Force Burglary (TFB). The other unit I studied had been named Task Force Pickpocketing (TFP). At TFP, detectives were focused primarily on investigating foreign nationals stealing credit cards in and around Copenhagen. While the work of the two units differed, they obviously had many features in common, as both of them spent most of their time policing crimes committed by non-Danish or “transnational” suspects, this kind of police work being my specific research interest.

Returning to the opening example, it reveals two points that will be elaborated on in this chapter. First, it illustrates how Danish police and prosecutors celebrate ‘a good verdict’, thereby showing that a central occupational satisfaction of police/criminal justice work is tied to a case reaching its conclusion, and, importantly, that this conclusion includes, seen from a law enforcement perspective, an adequately harsh sentence (cf. Punch, 2009). It is indeed a not-so-hidden truth that the police often measure the quality of their work in such quantifiable terms, assessing the effectiveness of their efforts not only in relation to winning the case but also in relation to whether or not the perpetrators are given sufficiently long criminal sentences (ibid). The example also shows something else: it hints at how law enforcers don’t necessarily evaluate apparently similar verdicts in uniform ways. Put differently, even if two crimes and their legally sanctioned punishments are exactly the same, the punishments will, nevertheless, sometimes be differently appreciated. A prison sentence given to one burglar may be seen as a win, whereas the very same prison sentence given to another similarly felonious individual is seen as something of a loss. In the above example, it was a win. But in many other instances, I have witnessed police detectives helping to secure ostensibly satisfactory convictions, but, nonetheless, complaining about, as they would say, ‘how the verdict may seem good, but it is essentially futile.’

The question, then, is why that is? What makes one conviction worth celebrating, while the next, seemingly comparable one, is deemed futile and a cause for police frustration?

The short answer pondered in this chapter is that, in evaluating whether a verdict is a good one – and thus worth celebrating – the police focus not only on the length of time to be served but on *who* it is that is serving time and, not least, how they react. Here we may return to the words and reactions expressed at the start. In my ethnographic studies of transnational detective work, I have mostly looked at detectives investigating foreign criminal suspects, for example at Danish detectives investigating Poles, Romanians, Chileans or Moroccans in relation to a series of burglaries committed in and around Denmark. In doing so, I repeatedly encountered police complaining about how ‘Danish criminal law’, as one detective told me,

‘isn’t geared to this larger global reality. Six months in the slammer may scare a typical Dane, and prevent him committing a crime, but if we’re talking underprivileged Poles, Romanians, or wherever these foreign, transnational criminals come from, six months is nothing. I mean, I’ve even heard them talk about Danish prisons as hotels or spas. Spas, I tell you! So yeah, we may get a verdict, but really, it’s not a verdict. It’s a joke.’

This takes us back to my second point: the police measure the value of their job and their own efforts in terms of both the quantity *and* quality of a sentence. They want the sentence not only to amount to a predefined tally of some sort; they also want it to be truly felt by the person sentenced (cf. Fassin, 2013). And as shown in the earlier examples, law enforcers – or at least the law enforcers I have been studying – have very different ideas about whether a sentence is indeed felt by, and thus worries, the person sentenced, depending on who the criminal is and where s/he is from. Combining words of the Danish detective above and the prosecutor we met earlier, a prison sentence should not be received like a hotel stay. Instead, when it comes to their policing of foreign suspects, the hammer of justice should ‘be brought down hard’ to make sure that ‘the light in their eyes’ fades quickly.

On police punishment and pleasure

Bearing such ideas about law enforcement in mind, this chapter sets out to discuss some of their implications. In the literature, for example, it has frequently been noted how officers of the law often want harsher sentences for certain segments of society, including foreigners and ethnic minorities (cf. Holmberg, 2003; Aliverti, 2013; 2020; Fassin, 2013; 2017; Weber, 2013; Bowling and Westenra, 2018; Mutsaers, 2019). That the police not only in Denmark but across Europe tend to have a negative view of foreigners or minorities, or even experience an added

need to police them, is also something touched upon by many of this volume's authors (see Gauthier and de Maillard, Khodzhaeva, Nafstad, Pates). It has also frequently been noted in the literature how the police occasionally act on such sentiments and deliver their own form of 'street justice' (Hughes, 1962; Klockars, 1980; Sykes, 1986; Dick, 2005; Jauregui, 2016), or how they at times even tinker with procedures or fabricate evidence to secure what they believe to be a just sentence (op cit). Indeed, this recently led Fassin (2018) to argue that ethnographies and theories of policing need to escape the formalistic clutches of 'legal theory' – a legal theory (or legal philosophy) which maintains that the actual act of 'punishment' is not part of the policing mandate, but that it is something decided by the courts and served in, for example, prison. Rather, Fassin argues, with reference to his own work and many other existing examples, we need to accept that the police *do* think about how to not just apprehend but also punish people and thus, at times, apply their own form of punishment (see also Harkin, 2015; Mutsaers and van Nuenen, 2018). This may not be 'punishment' in terms of conventional criminal justice, but, in reality, it is perceived and, very much experienced, as such by both the doers of the deed and those on the receiving end. Our understanding of what criminal justice punishment is, Fassin (2018) therefore contends, should not be unthinkingly governed by the letter of the law but, rather, be explored qualitatively and empirically – explored in realist rather than formalistic terms.

Pursuing this train of thought, the following pages examine how and why detectives think that certain foreign nationals deserve added punishment. Here, contrary to most of the work on the subject cited earlier, which tends to focus on how punitive police attitudes towards foreigners are a matter of the police either thinking less of them and/or thinking that they deserve extra and sometimes extra-legal police attention (cf. Fassin 2018), this chapter sheds light on an ancillary yet rarely discussed cause of punitive police attitudes. Recalling the examples given earlier, the chapter suggests that one of the key reasons the police think that some foreigners need additional punishment may be found in the police's ideas about certain sentences' lacking emotional impact on criminals *and*, furthermore, that such ideas often rest on simple, cultural relativistic ideas about how much pain people from different places and sociocultural backgrounds can withstand. Indeed, as I was frequently told in an example of homebrewed, utilitarian police thinking (akin to what Beek and Bierschenk discuss as the 'para-ethnology' (Bierschenk, 2019; Beek and Bierschenk, 2020) of state bureaucrats), 'Romanians [or Poles or Moroccans] are used to much worse. This is why harsher sentences are needed.'

While the degree of such penal para-ethnology differed (see also Beek and Bierschenk, this volume), this was a common emic or ‘underground’ (see Gauthier and de Maillard, this volume) way for the police to casually categorise, ‘culturalise’ (see Müller, this volume) or ‘parallelise’ (see Nafstad, this volume) the varied sensitivities of different nationalities, ethnicities and social groups (see also Van Maanen, 1978).

As will be further demonstrated, such cultural relativistic punitive thinking very much affected the detectives’ ideas about professional fulfilment and thus their actions. Therefore, as the chapter concludes, although it may appear unusual and maybe even unnecessary, there is much to be said for focusing on what I have elsewhere called ‘the pleasures of policing’ (Sausdal, 2018b) or what Hörnqvist (2021) has very recently discussed as *The Pleasure of Punishment*; i.e. focusing on both the larger and smaller things that the police appreciate about their work, including that which stands in the way of vocational pleasure. (For similar calls for a criminology of emotions see De Haan and Loader, 2002; Jacobsen and Walklate, 2019). This is important as it helps us to understand what motivates police conduct and misconduct beyond the grander organisational or institutional logics that are more often focused on in police research. Moreover, such an emotive focus may be especially productive in the constantly globalising, technologising and technocratising world of policing (cf. Chan et al., 2001; Jones and Newburn, 2002; Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012; Lemieux, 2013; Bradford et al., 2016; Sheptycki, 2017) as it offers a particular analytical prism by which some of its consequences may be further understood (see also the discussion by Mutsaers and van Nuenen (this volume) of different technological “security innovations” used to police a more complex world and how these, although often presented and perceived in a positivistic light, include and build on often-unexplored, socio-culturally conditioned ideas).

Indeed, focusing on everyday police (dis)pleasures – disregarding whether they stem from more hands-on or technological policing methods – may help us further understand why police officers frequently have a low opinion of some foreign suspects and why this may provoke extra-legal measures, not just because of that low opinion, but because of the way it devalues what they get from policing and convicting those suspects (See also Gauthier and de Maillard’s discussion of police racism vis-à-vis “police frustration” in this volume). Therein also lies a ‘Dirty Harry’ logic (cf. Klockars 1980), yet of a more emotive and globalised sort – a logic where the impulse of the police to be the deliverers of punishment is driven not only by the fact that, in this global age, people get away with their crimes with impunity but that they

(even when caught) get away with them without proper punishment being administered and pain caused, and, hence, without police vocational pleasure being derived from the process.

Three examples: Pornography, kindergartens and police corrections

Before going into the more theoretical issues already outlined, allow me to provide some further examples of how Danish detectives frequently experienced a lack of vocational fulfilment in their policing of particular foreign nationals.

Example 1:

TFB Detectives Ibsen and Thorsen and I are in Vestre Prison, waiting by the front desk. Vestre Prison is Copenhagen's largest jail, not that far from the city centre. We are there to pick up a Romanian citizen, Christi, who is a primary suspect in a big TFB case. Christi was arrested a few days ago and is supposed to have his fingerprints and photo taken today at the nearby City police station. The detectives talk to the employee on the front desk, letting her know why they are there. A few minutes later, Christi comes out, escorted through a massive iron door by a prison guard. Christi smiles and greets us. 'You look tremendously happy', Detective Ibsen remarks, 'Why is that? There's no reason to be happy about what've you done and your situation!' Christi continues to smile and then says in bad but fairly comprehensible English 'Yeah, it's hard not to be happy. Instead of living under a motorway bridge, and having to search for food all day, I now get a bed to sleep in. And', he laughs, 'here I also get porn channels on the telly! So, what's not to like?!' The detectives laugh, seeing the amusing absurdity in how a Danish penitentiary is providing a Romanian suspect with such 'comforts' as free pornography. Yet, as they then tell me (in Danish): 'It's also madly provocative to see him smile like that and talk about porn. It's like he couldn't care less. And seriously, that's how it is. You heard him. Here they get food, shelter, a PlayStation, free dental service and other healthcare things beyond their wildest dreams and so on. Like, look at him', Detective Thorsen almost shouts, pointing to Christi who, is now having his fingerprints taken by Detective Ibsen, 'he's yakking away like some happy kid although we're in the basement of a cold and ugly police station. I mean, surely, that's a bit off, right?! It makes you wonder if it even matters what we do here.'

First of all, I should note that Christi, in a later conversation I had with him as we drove back to Vestre Prison, revealed that he in fact wasn't as happy about his situation as he otherwise

suggested. He *did* feel the strain of being locked up and, most of the time, being unable to see or speak with his loved ones. He also admitted that a stay at a Danish prison wasn't, of course, in any way like a hotel stay. So the lack of concern and even occasional delight which Christi, and many other foreign arrestees whom I encountered during my research, displayed, should surely also be understood as its own particular interactional performance, as 'impression management' (Goffman, 1978), instead of being read as a genuine sentiment.

Remembering its potentially performative nature, here is another example of how foreign suspects projected a lack of concern in relation to the threats of the Danish police and criminal justice systems:

Example 2:

Through the wiretaps the detectives at TFB and TFP were running, they were privy to many matters of investigative relevance as well as to more mundane issues. One day, discussing wiretaps in general, and wiretaps on foreign nationals in particular, a TFB detective pointed me to 'one of our most disturbing findings'. 'Then again', he carried on, 'it's not really a surprise to us and perhaps therefore not that disturbing but just the sad truth of it all.' With this as a cliff-hanger, he invited me to drop by his office to show me what he was talking about. Doing so, I was presented with the following recorded telephone conversation between a Polish suspect and his partner: 'Hey love, don't worry. It's not that bad. Not that bad at all. There's no actual punishment up here [in Denmark]. Prisons are like kindergartens. There's nothing to worry about.' In rehearing this wiretapped conversation, the detective exclaimed: 'you see, they don't give a shit. The whole idea about how the threat of getting caught and serving time acts as a form of deterrence, doesn't really work here. Almost the contrary. One almost gets the sense that they look forward to it. Knowing this makes it hard to motivate oneself, let me tell you. It's both depressing and infuriating. We feel mocked. Obviously, things need to be done to fix this!'

Again, bracketing how this may not directly reflect the suspect's sentiments but his (perhaps stereotypically masculine) way of downplaying the dangers of his criminal enterprise in front of people he holds dear, it nonetheless demonstrates the two points being made in this chapter. On one hand, we see criminal suspects involved in a projection-cum-performance of being unworried by any punishment the Danish criminal justice system might impose. On the other hand, and in reaction to this, we see police detectives displaying feelings of dismay, faced with the apparent fact that the corrective culmination of their work is not actually felt and feared as

a culmination after all. ‘Things need to be done to fix this!’ was the conclusion drawn by the detective quoted above – a conclusion largely shared not only by his unit but, in my experience, throughout the Danish Police as well as by many other Danish criminal justice representatives, politicians, pundits and members of the public.

In a third and last example, I will go into some of the most common ways in which the police contemplated ‘fixing this’ themselves, including how they sometimes did so. First and foremost, in accordance with the playbook of criminal justice politics and procedural law, the detectives spoke about how the Danish parliament had to pass new and harsher laws, how the courts had to use the full powers of existing laws, as well as how the prosecutor’s office should dare to try cases in novel ways, which could lead to harsher convictions and thus act as a precedent in future verdicts. In line with many Danish political parties, the officers also contemplated how, in qualitative terms, the prison experience could be made less positive. This included treating foreign convicts differently from Danish convicts when imprisoned in Denmark, affording them fewer rights and perks, and the possibility of sending them home to serve their sentence in their own countries – or even in Danish-owned or chartered prisons outside Denmark, preferably in countries where prisoners don’t have the same rights and are treated less well than in Denmark.

While some of these suggestions by Danish police officers seem extreme, they do in fact mirror many of the thoughts and even penal policies contemplated and carried out by politicians in Denmark and elsewhere around the world (cf. Pakes and Holt, 2017). In Denmark, at least, the political discourse often involves an almost schizophrenic appreciation of the Danish Criminal Justice system, hailing its ‘penal exceptionalism’ (Smith, 2012), i.e. feeling proud that we (purportedly) treat lawbreakers more humanely than do most other countries, while simultaneously communicating a (xenophobic) exasperation with the fact that the very same ‘exceptional’ humaneness is benefiting the wrong humans, i.e. foreigners.

However, even though public and political sentiments are in fact fairly well aligned with those of the detectives, the latter didn’t always satisfy themselves with the hope that such policies and procedures would be applied to ‘fix things’ and, as another detective put it, ‘make punishment actually feel like punishment for foreign criminals.’ When it came to particular foreign nationals, the detectives therefore (not frequently but occasionally) also took matters into their own hands:

Example 3

[In Danish]: He's an idiot. Look at him. Dumber than shit. [In English]: 'Isn't that right, my friend?' the detective suddenly says in a language everybody understands, turning around in the front seat of the police car to address the Bulgarian suspect they are transporting from his cell to the courtroom. Today is going to be the Bulgarian's final day in court, with the verdict being handed out by the judge. The suspect looks toward the detective, surprised by the sudden question. 'Isn't that right? Isn't that right what I just said?' The detective repeats. Befuddled, the suspect only answers 'what?' and the detectives laugh. 'That's what I thought,' the detective concludes, switching back to Danish, only to continue his disparaging talk about how dumb he thinks the suspect is – just like most of his fellow nationals. Later, when taking the suspect from the car to the courtroom, the detectives do so in an intentionally rough way, pulling and pushing the cuffed suspect around and occasionally bumping him 'gently' into the wall of the courthouse elevator. Throughout the process, the detectives make sure to communicate their dislike both verbally and physically – be it through obvious badmouthing in Danish, demeaning comments in English or rougher than usual treatment of the suspect.

Later, after the suspect has been sentenced to less than a year in prison for his crimes, the detectives and I drive back to the police station. Ever since the judge passed the verdict, they have been clearly irritated. 'What a shit verdict', one of them says. 'Absolute bullshit', the other agrees. 'Don't you think?', they ask me. 'Didn't you see how little the suspect cared about it. It was a drop in the ocean for him. Nothing more ... But, yes, that's how it often is. You should know by now [still speaking to me]. We do our best, but the end product is rarely satisfying. This is also why we sometimes give these foreigners a hard time. That's the only chance we have to slightly settle the score and scare them. I know it doesn't look good. I saw you thinking that. But, knowing what you know now, you must be able to understand that it's only fair that these suspects get to experience some sort of punishment, no?'

As a trying-to-be impartial ethnographer, I – to this and similar questions – answered that I could understand how frustrating it was for them to experience that their work didn't really amount to what they hoped it would. Certainly, as in the above example, it wasn't rare for me to witness the police applying all sorts of minor (and a few more major) punitive corrections, be it in the form of belittling talk or physical treatment. On other occasions, I experienced the detectives as well as prosecutors more or less intentionally using the language gap to create confusion about foreign suspects' rights – not directly stepping over the line (to the best of my knowledge), but actively making use of the many things that could be lost in translation (the

problems/power of language and translation is also something discussed in this volume by Beek and Müller, Borelli, as well as Kolloch and Meyer). These were, as the detectives in the above example and many of their colleagues openly admitted, ways of somehow settling the score – ways of making the Danish criminal justice system feel more oppressive. ‘Yet, obviously, the score is not really settled’, as another TFP detective told me. ‘Most of the time, it is us falling short and them getting a short and to them relaxing time in a cosy Danish prison.’

From an iron to a velvet fist

‘We feel almost impotent. All too often, they don’t give a shit about what we can do to them.’

- A Danish police detective

Compared to other examples of police xenophobia and misconduct seen around the world, the Danish detectives’ everyday corrections weren’t massive transgressions but they were transgressions, nonetheless. It was the police officers’ often self-admitted way of trying to make sure that the foreign nationals did, ultimately, feel that the Danish criminal justice system wasn’t too much of a joke, and, as such, their way of not feeling mocked. Indeed, feelings of mockery, falling short and even professional impotence were something that I frequently came across in my studies. Outcries like the above regularly echoed among the detectives when they were commenting on how they struggled to frighten foreign suspects both as a preventive and punitive measure.

In many ways, the examples I have provided are not novel. Looking at policing literature, and especially the newer literature that concerns itself with the policing of migrants and borders in a globalised world (See this issue as well as Pickering, 2004; Fassin, 2013; Andersson, 2014; Sanchez, 2014; Loftus, 2015; Melossi, 2015; Bosworth, 2017; Franko, 2019; Gundhus and Jansen, 2019; Aliverti, 2020), this chapter’s examples seemingly mirror a lot of what we already know; namely that police officers, on the one hand, believe that certain kinds of criminals are getting away (largely) unpunished and that the police need to step in to make sure that justice is served. Such ‘corrective’ action by the police have long been a central interest of policing studies. A most famous example is that of Klockar’s ‘The Dirty Harry Problem’ (1980) in which he discusses the moral paradox that law enforcers often seem to find themselves in. As he deftly writes, ‘[p]olicing constantly places its practitioners in situations in which good

ends can be achieved by dirty means. When the ends to be achieved are urgent and unquestionably good and only a dirty means will work to achieve them' (ibid).

While the scale and substance of such a claim has been up for debate (cf. Sykes, 1986; Jauregui, 2016; Fassin, 2018), there is unquestionably some truth to it. From their own point of view, the police often experience that those they believe to be bad people get away with their crimes. In one of the more recent ethnographic explorations of this sentiment and its consequences, Fassin (2013) has described how Parisian police officers apply their very own form of street justice. Even when proper evidence doesn't exist, Parisian officers remain unwavering in their belief that many ethnic minorities and migrants living in the Parisian banlieues are inherently felonious. If they didn't commit a specific crime, they will do at another time. This is the rationale that the officers use to justify their excessive and abusive ways.

The examples of self-excused police misconduct are indeed many. Of a more recent character, one could mention Ralph's (2020) discussion of police torture in the US, Weber's *Policing non-citizens* (2012) about Australian migration control efforts, Weber and Bowling's (2013) edited collection on the problems of police 'stop and search' methods in both the UK, Australia and beyond (2013), Fassin's (2013) as well as other similar French studies (Maillard, 2019), Mutsaers' work on policing and migration in the Netherlands (2019), Hornberger's study of everyday policing in Johannesburg (2011), Beek and Göpfert's ethnography of police violence in West Africa (2013) or Jauregui's (2016) dissecting of police misconduct in India, together demonstrating its global spread. What unites these and similar studies is that they illustrate how policing around the world habitually entails a heightened mistrust if not prejudice toward certain people deemed to be outsiders – and how this sentiment and labelling is at the root of police discrimination and malpractice.

Another root of police (mis)conduct

There is however something to be added here. Most of the existing literature on the matter takes its analytical cue from the idea that such police misconduct happens because the police feel unable to secure a conviction and thus need, themselves, to act as the judge, *and/or*, because the police have prejudices and believe that some people deserve tougher treatment regardless of their actual culpability. While I agree that both of these readings would make sense in relation to my observations, I often found that police officers' low opinion of, and (mis)conduct towards, particular foreign suspects were not (only) caused by concerns about actual impunity

or by the identity of the suspects. Police opinions and (mis)behaviour were also very much driven, as seen above, by their own feelings of being professionally ineffectual coupled with their crude, cultural relativistic ideas of pain (cf. Scarry, 1987) rather than because of their dislike of the criminal justice system or the culprits *per se*.

Herein, I believe, lies a largely unexplored aspect of policing and, in this case, a potential reason for the increase in police misconduct seen not only in Denmark but worldwide. Although studies are sparse, similarly stories seem to emerge from other examinations, in particular of local law enforcement agencies engaging in transnational policing (cf. Feldman, 2019). What these studies illustrate is, on the one hand, that police officers engage in what may be termed their own form of ‘theory of mind’ (cf Aliverti 2021). In order to be able not only to physically apprehend (i.e. locate and catch) increasing numbers of criminal suspects from other places and countries but also to be able to conceptually apprehend them (i.e. comprehend who they are, where they come from, their background and what their intent and purposes are) (Muir, 1979; Sausdal, 2014; Vigh, 2018) officers make up their own sociological-cum-anthropological typification (see also Van Maanen, 1978; Holmberg, 2003). In a less mono-cultural world, such cross-cultural, ‘para-ethnological’ (Beek and Bierschenk, 2020) police readings are predictably increasing. Yet, at this chapter suggests, such cultural analyses not only create (simple) typifications; they also have consequences in terms of how the police relate to people. To be sure, as many a study has already shown, police typification often carries with it the risk of police discrimination – crude typification or categorisation allowing for crude treatment (Holmberg, 2000; Mastrofski, 2004).

In some ways, this is also what is at play in this chapter. Yet, contrary to other studies that focus on how crude cultural categorisations directly provide the grounds for police (mis)conduct (cf. Van Maanen, 1978; Borrelli, this volume; Nafstad, this volume), what studies of locally based transnational policing, my own included, also show is that the negative view held by the police toward foreigners is not necessarily only *sui generis*. Rather, it seems to stem from these idiosyncratic ideas about how much punishment-induced pain a given culprit from a given place can bear for it to feel like a real punishment. Whether it is true that people from different places can handle more pain than others due to the differences in the living conditions they are used to, is not the point here. These ideas may or may not be figments of the police imagination (For more on Western (criminal justice) ideas about the sentiments of others, see Scarry, 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2008; Beek et al., 2017). The point is that Danish police,

in their meetings with an increasing influx of foreign suspects often from far less affluent places, apply such thinking. Furthermore, such thinking is what leads to the police experiencing that what they used to appreciate as a gratifying professional culmination, the final conviction of criminals, is becoming less gratifying and even the source of irritation and impotence. Instead of experiencing criminals quiver when having their sentences handed down, Danish detectives get the gnawing sensation that the criminals don't care.

‘Look at this. This is what I’m talking about. This is how they do it in Sweden, you know just across the strait [i.e. the Øresund strait between Denmark and Sweden]. There you get many years in the slammer almost automatically if you’re a professional and incorrigible pickpocket. That’s punishment for you – something foreigners will feel and fear. Instead, what we have here is as soft as this very chapter I’m waving at you. Look at it. It’s laughable.’

Whether or not sentences are in fact harsher or milder in Sweden or elsewhere is not here of interest. What matters in the scope of this chapter is that Danish detectives often believe this to be the case, which reinforces their dispirited feeling of belonging to a criminal justice system made mediocre by an increasingly globalized world order. Certainly, it wouldn't be far from the truth, listening to Detective Jensen's words, to say that the Danish police frequently felt that one of their most treasured policing instruments, i.e. the proverbial iron fist of policing, had lost its power – at least in relation to those foreign nationals who didn't recognize it as such. Typically, the police may allude to the consequences for suspects of a possible conviction. Unfortunately, from the perspective of the police officers I spent time with, their iron fist is losing its punch in a globalized world. To them, it appears more like a velvet fist – delivering frustratingly soft touches.

Concluding perspectives: Dirty Harry goes global?

One may feel little concern about police impotence. One may snigger at it. One may even think it is a good thing, wanting the police to lose their powers, to ‘end policing’ (Vitale, 2017). Yet, as of now, police forces like the Danish police are still very much involved in maintaining a multitude of lines between right and wrong. Moreover, as Aliverti (2021) for example has also recently considered, in many societies around the world the police are increasingly chosen as a central tool in the control of, and fight against, many of the perceived internal societal threats posed in and by a globalized world, as many societies are ‘governing through (globalized)

crime’ (Simon, 2007; Findlay, 2013). One may therefore say that the police are, outwardly, as potent as ever. Bracketing recent and mostly US-based calls to ‘defund’ or even ‘abolish’ the police in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, the police at least enjoy a significant amount of political and public support. This is also so in Denmark. In fact, Danes’ trust in the police is often among the highest in the world if not the highest (Justitsministeriet, 2016).

Still, if I was asked to point to some of the key findings of my ethnographic study, one of them would be that of a widely felt powerlessness among Danish police detectives (see Sausdal 2018). As discussed throughout this chapter, this powerlessness often found its expression as detectives experienced that foreign criminal suspects seemingly did not find the punitive powers of the Danish criminal justice system to be punitive at all. The detectives put in the work, got the convictions, but, contrary to the normal elation at experiencing a suspect’s desolation after a court ruling, they often found foreign nationals to be largely indifferent.

As described here, the detectives’ feelings that a sentence but no actual punishment was being delivered drove them to hold negative opinions about foreign suspects and, at times, to administer some additional and painful punishment of their own. Therein lies the simple yet central contribution of this chapter: First, even though I suspect this is something that most police ethnographers have come across, it is rare to find studies that have seriously thought about how the police find vocational gratification in securing the right kind of convictions *and* how this gratification is directly tied to police officers’ experience of suspects feeling the weight of the conviction in not only quantitative but qualitative terms. The discovery of the impact of everyday work (dis)pleasures on policing indeed highlights the advantage of taking an ‘anthropology of work’ approach to police (mis)conduct (Bierschenk, 2019; Katzenstein, 2020; Sausdal, 2020a).

Secondly, very little if anything has been written about how this relates to the policing of foreigners, ethnic minorities or other societal groups that usually bear the brunt of police attention. Indeed, if my own ethnography provides any general insight, it is that a lack of focus on workday police (dis)pleasures may be a missed opportunity as much of the (Danish) police’s frustration in relation to foreign suspects seems to revolve around not just the fact that the police see them as ‘bad people’ per se, but also around the fact that these are people who don’t seem to care about what the police can do to them – i.e. being a matter of felt punitive impotence more than actual impunity.

Bearing this in mind, and looking at the present and future of policing, I sometimes fear that we may have a bigger problem on our hands than this chapter has so far identified. Because, if a root of police misconduct can be located in the growing feelings of punitive impotence, rather than just in fears of impunity (Klockars 1980, Fassin 2013, 2018,) we may be looking into a future where police officers increasingly take matters into their own hands. If it is the experience not only of Danish officers but of officers from around the world that what they ultimately work towards (policing their avowed thin blue line by securing satisfying criminal convictions) is increasingly resulting in, for them, unsatisfying convictions, then there might be reason to think that the police will increasingly look for ways to level the score. In other words, we may see a new and problematic source of ‘street justice’ – a street justice fostered by the fact that the suspect pool is increasingly diverse and the police experience that this diversity has lessened criminals’ experience of the criminal justice system as a punishment. At least, this is the case in a, traditionally, low net migration country like Denmark – a country where, one may add, the police force is not particularly diverse.

Of course, in terms of formal legal theory, the police shouldn’t bother themselves with the means and ends of punishment. But they do. The police may also be wrong in thinking that some foreign criminals don’t really think of their sentence as a punishment. Nevertheless, this *is* how the police often think. This is also why I have frequently thought that what I have been a witness to is akin to Klockars’ famous Dirty Harry problem. However, in the context of this chapter, it is a sense of moral disproportion ‘gone global’. Rather than being a matter of a local rogue detective doing whatever it takes to convict a felon, one of Dirty Harry’s biggest issues in a more global and intersecting world may not just be a matter of finding the evidence and building a case but making sure that the eventual conviction and sentence is, so to speak, culturally appropriate – that it fits nominally *and* normatively.

To the best of my knowledge, Danish detectives have mostly refrained from following in Clint Eastwood’s filmic footsteps. And I suspect that they will keep following the letter of law for a while to come. Nevertheless, I also suspect that their daily complaining and frustration at how certain foreign criminals in reality (the police’s reality, that is) escape a suitable painful experience of justice is a bubble that could easily burst and then seep into actual police practice. From what we already know from the literature, the police are certainly not the best at handling feelings of professional frailty (Manning, 2012). On the contrary, they have a tendency to answer professional frailty with not only elusive but also spectacular displays of power.

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