ABSTRACT: This article discusses a high-profile 2020 Danish murder case where a young man was brutally killed by two brothers on the small island of Bornholm—a case that became the center of attention not only in Denmark but internationally with the New York Times reporting on it, saying “A Black Man Was Tortured and Killed in Denmark. The Police Insist It Wasn’t about Race.” Building on my long-standing ethnographic research of police investigations in and beyond Denmark, the article contemplates why the Danish police so readily denied the existence of a hate crime. How, in other words, was it possible for the Danish police to deny what to others seemed so apparent? Was it indeed yet another case of police prejudice as both media and many others believed? Or could it, as this article suggests, also be an example of a specific mode of rationality that governs much police thinking and detective work specifically?

KEYWORDS: Black Lives Matters, bureaucracy, Denmark, detective work, policing, racism, rationality

“We just wanted to teach him a lesson,” the two brothers explained in court. This was their way of defending what the autopsy report had horrifyingly described as “second-degree burns, broken legs and fingers, damage to the brain and multiple stab wounds” (TV 2 2020)—evidence of the extreme and eventually fatal violence committed by the two brothers from the Danish island of Bornholm against a fellow citizen. As the coroner in the later retrial bluntly put it, “this very much equals mutilation!” Nevertheless, the “lesson” the brothers had wanted to teach their victim, they argued in their defense, was caused by the victim’s sexual and abusive relationship with their mother. Before mutilating him and leaving him to die in a faraway forest, the brothers had in fact been very close friends with the victim, they said. The younger brother even said in front of the judge that he had considered the deceased his “best friend,” in his own mind further clarifying why he had been so aggressively upset.

The petrifying degree of the violence committed and the comparable pettiness of what apparently provoked it is in itself harrowing. Yet, this specific murder became international news—with, for example, the New York Times reporting on it with a headline stating, “A Black Man Was...
Tortured and Killed in Denmark. The Police Insist It Wasn’t about Race” (Erdbrik 2020) not only because a young man was the victim of what the prosecutor described as “hell-like violence,” but also because of the possible reasons for his killing. The young man was of Tanzanian descent and the perpetrators were white Danes, but also the brothers, especially the younger one, were locally known for voicing racist views. The younger brother even had a Nazi tattoo on his leg.

With this in mind, the brothers’ story about how they “just wanted to teach him a lesson” appeared as a rather unconvincing way to hide an ulterior motive, namely that of unhinged racism. This was at least what many protestors from near and far argued, stirred not just by the ostensible racial component of what was later in court deemed a homicide, but surely also by the fact that the murder happened in the wake of the much-debated police killing of the Black American George Floyd and the following widespread Black Lives Matter, anti-racism protests against police violence and prejudice in the US and beyond, Denmark included.

To the detriment of the anti-racist agenda, however, the case against the two brothers was never tried as a hate crime—not in its initial trial in the district courts or in its late 2021 retrial in the Danish higher courts. The brothers were—both times—successfully convicted of having murdered their alleged “friend,” sentenced first to 14 years and then, in the retrial, 15 years in prison, but a hate crime never became part of the charges against them. It was this very omission that made many stakeholders (international media outlets like the *New York Times* included) rally against the Danish police, the criminal prosecutor, and Danish society in general. How, indeed, was it possible for police to leave the motive of racism aside when the heinous act involved the brutal killing of Black man—a Black man killed by two white men with at least one of them known for harboring racist views and donning racist body “art”?

It is certainly difficult to grasp why the Danish criminal legal system did not include racism as a motive. This was also why I, as one of Denmark’s rather few policing scholars, was contacted by several colleagues, urging me to criticize the criminal legal system for not pursuing this angle. Like the Danish racism and discrimination scholar, Mira Skadegård (2020) bluntly put it in a left-wing, national media outlet:

> I’m shocked that both the police—and a big part of the media—don’t bring up the question of racism in relation to this homicide. But it takes courage to get to the root of evil and see the murder as a possible expression of the racism present in our society . . . There is no doubt that racism may be part of the murder . . . This murder is a symptom of a larger societal issue.¹

In the eyes of good colleagues such as Skadegård, as well as many other stakeholders, the only possible reason that the brothers were not charged with having committed a racially motivated murder had to be that the police, the criminal legal system, and Danish society itself were turning a blind eye. It was, in other words, yet another sad example of the police being a deeply prejudiced institution in an also prejudiced society, as is well documented and discussed in the policing literature (Banton 2018; Bowling et al. 2005; Chaney and Robertson 2013; Fassin 2013; Holdaway and O’Neill 2006).

While not at all disregarding the possibility of police prejudice being part of the equation, this article ponders an additional explanation. Building on my ethnographic experiences of researching detective work (Sausdal 2018, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), the article draws on Martin Innes’s (2002) writings about the existence of a specific “mode of investigational rationality.” It does so to be able to further reflect on why the Danish police chose not to pursue a hate crime charge. Indeed, as other police researchers and anthropologists have also argued (see Beek and Bierschenk 2020; Lipsky 2010; Maguire 2014; McLaughlin and Levi 1995; Mutsaers 2019; Reiner 1995), street-level bureaucrats like the police have a largely self-referential way of thinking about their work—a bureaucratic way of thought that to the
system itself appears completely rational while appearing irrational if not prejudiced to those peripheral to it. In this way, the existence of a certain mode of investigational rationality certainly makes the police culprits of insular thinking, but the question is, does it necessarily make for racist thinking? This is the central question I discuss here, as the article includes different empirical examples of how police detectives tend to think and work, comparing these with how police racism is regularly theorized in the available literature (for an overview, see Bowling et al. 2005; Rowe 2012).

Methodology

Before further contemplating issues of police prejudice, a few words must be said about the study that underpins this article. In brief, the empirical material presented here stems from an extensive ethnographic study of transnational policing in Denmark and beyond. I have, more specifically, spent the past decade ethnographically studying the work of Danish, Romanian, Spanish, and Portuguese police detectives engaged in investigating issues of transnational crime. In addition to more than a thousand hours of observations of day-to-day detective work, my study also includes semi-structured interviews of more than 50 police interlocutors (including frontline personnel, specialists, and management) from the aforementioned countries as well as from transnational policing organizations such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Frontex, Interpol, and Europol. These empirical engagements have afforded me many otherwise hard to-come by insights into the business of transnational policing, among these an inside view to the everyday practices and logics of police intelligence and investigations (investigations that have frequently involved foreign nationals and ethnic minorities as both suspects and victims).

In addition to my ethnographic work, I have carefully been following and documenting the Bornholm murder case. I started doing so ever since it first became headline news, and I continued all the way up to the first verdict in the district court to its retrial in the Danish higher courts, charting among other things what the case’s different stakeholders have had to say about the case and its potential motives. Lastly, I have conducted five semi-structured interviews with seasoned Danish police detectives in which we have discussed the Bornholm murder case. Although the detectives themselves were not directly involved in this particular case, they all had inside information about it, as well as many years of experience investigating high-profile criminal cases. Certainly, my various research efforts have not granted me the perfect Archimedean point from where I can grasp all there is to know about the Bornholm case and its motives. They have, however, given me a considerable understanding of how criminal investigations usually work and what particular rationalities they typically include.

Police Racism

Having discussed the article’s methodological foundation, I now move on to the question of the Bornholm murder case and, specifically, to the question of police racism. To understand how this question is usually depicted in the literature, I hereunder list the most predominant theoretical explanations of police racism. The breadth of research on police racism (not here mentioning research on racism more generally) is of course more extensive and nuanced than the scope of this article allows. Still, the following three-step explanation (going from more individual, micro perspectives to the more societal and macro-oriented) arguably captures the
most traditional ways of discussing issues of racism in policing research (see, e.g., Banton 2018; Bowling et al. 2005).

**Bad Apples (Micro Accounts)**

The bad/rotten apple theory looks at how racist police attitudes and behavior originate from certain rogue individuals inside police force—a theory used to explain not only issues of racism but other kinds of police misconduct as well (see Weitzer and Tuch 2004). Rather than arguing that the entire police force is racist, the idea is that a few or more individuals are to blame for most of the wrongdoing. This is also the explanation/excuse that the police themselves repeatedly offer, the Danish police force included, when trying to explain (away) examples of discriminatory practices. In general, “police forces are not racist;” the story goes. “The actions of the few, ruin it for the many” the police management might say, this indeed being a type of explanation I myself have also been introduced to more than a couple of times.

Yet, the rotten apple theory may also extend beyond the corrupt individual into involving rotten apples in the plural, denoting specific police units where prejudiced outlooks thrive—units or groups that due to their specific constellation, demography, history, or attention foster intolerance more than elsewhere. This, for example, is what Didier Fassin (2013) showed in his celebrated *Enforcing Order* monography, describing the jaggedness and prejudice of a particular Parisian anti-riot police unit (see also Ivković 2009). And this is something also seen in recent reports on the Danish police where, for example, a canine unit in Copenhagen was recently accused of treating ethnic minorities, including its own colleagues, in crude and discriminatory ways (Sivkær Pettersen 2019).

**Bad Organizations (Meso Accounts)**

Though the police themselves often point to these more individual or group-related explanations, many scholars find this unconvincing (see Ivković 2009; Punch 2003). Instead, the perhaps most common explanation of police racism in the policing literature involves a criticism of the police organization as such and how, for example, cadets are socialized into a widely xenophobic police work culture. The police, the “police culture” argument goes, make up its own normative, sociological microcosm, constantly (re)manufacturing conservative, macho, cynical, skeptical, action-oriented, and often somewhat intolerant members (Loftus 2009; Westmarland 2008). The faulting of “police culture” is also an argument often found in Danish and wider Nordic police research (Holmberg 2000; Sollund 2007; Valland 2011).

However, a few studies have questioned the simple idea that state and street-level bureaucrats come into an organizational setting, such as the police, as mere moral tabula rasas only then to adapt new and potentially prejudiced norms and values. A median argument, therefore, is the contention that the work culture of a police force is not just a matter of “bad” organizational enculturation but also a matter of police forces attracting and recruiting certain people who already have certain “bad” worldviews (see, e.g., Oberfield 2014).

**Bad Societies (Macro Accounts)**

Third, there is a larger theory of police racism that looks less at individual or organizational issues and instead turns its attention to the wider societal context. Scrutinizing the historical, sociocultural, and political structures of society, this theory argues that police prejudice should
be understood as an expression of racializing outlooks already integral to the societies of which the police are a part (see Lea 2000; Souhami 2007). Police thinking mirrors societal thinking. Applying concepts such as institutional, structural, or systemic racism (see also Feagin 2013), the reason behind the police’s discriminatory perceptions and practices is here gauged not as the accidental corruption of police officers or police organizations but rather as a broader societal corruption where the mistreatment and misappreciation of certain ethnic minorities have become integral to how “we” (i.e., the majority) all think and behave (see also Holdaway and O’Neill 2006; Waddington 1999). Be it in the form of written laws; regulations; bureaucratic, educational, or everyday practices; or simply how “our” habituated minds work, racist and racializing attitudes are ever present, thus also seeping into and shaping the thoughts of police detectives. This kind of structural and comprehensive thinking about the wider causes and consequences of racialized thinking is evidently integral to the growingly influential critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2007). Indeed, as racism scholar Nina Jablonski appropriately reminds us, “race-thinking and racism continue to frame the lives and define the nature of the human condition for most people in the world” (2018: 1).

Cases of Police Rationales

What the above explanations of police racism consequently tell us—twinning what many protestors were arguing and wanting me to argue—is that the Danish police’s choice not to pursue a hate crime charge had to do with the existence of (1) bigoted police individuals themselves either racist or, at least, completely uninterested in questions of racism and its consequences, (2) the existence of a prejudiced organizational culture in which Danish police officers are more or less socialized into disregarding certain ethnic others, and/or (3) police personnel, prosecutors included, belonging to a Danish society in which its structures and institutions are built on and thus furthers discriminatory practices and perceptions. Or as Skadegård (2020) simply argued: “There is no doubt that racism may be part of the murder . . . This murder is a symptom of a larger societal issue.”

International reports have undeniably demonstrated how policing in the West and worldwide are fraught with problems of intolerance—from specific situations to the societal (Bowing and Weber 2011; Chaney and Robertson 2013; Holdaway and O’Neill 2006; Ralph 2020; Rowe 2012; Waddington 1999). And as Nordic-based research has similarly shown, the Danish police as well as its Nordic sister organizations also struggle with ridding themselves of these issues (Høigård 2011; Holmberg 2000; Sollund 2007). Therefore, in proposing a possibly additional explanation to why the Danish police did not seem to take the hate crime motive seriously, I by no means aim to deny the possibility of the Danish police’s (in)actions also being a matter of police prejudice. Instead, what I “merely” wish to is to offer a more “anthropology of work”–oriented alternative to further explore the (mis)conduct. As Jessica Katzenstein (2020) have for example recently described it, an anthropology of work perspective focuses on the specificities of the police occupation, its institutional structures and norms, its materiality, alongside its workers’ daily practices and reasonings more than “just” focusing on issues of “governance, order, the law, culture, [or] morality,” as most anthropology of policing otherwise tends to (cf. Karpia and Garriott 2018). Yet, before delving into the specificities of the Danish police’s handling of the Bornholm murder case, the following two examples from two other Danish criminal investigations may help further illustrate how the police usually work and reason.
Case 1: The Chilean Case

It was a cause for celebration. The prosecutor assigned to the case had just returned to the police station north of Copenhagen from a day in court, announcing that a group of professional Chilean burglars had been sentenced to more than three years in prison. The detectives at the station were elated. They had been working on this case for the better part of a year. The Chilean nationals had come to the Danish police's attention when the police had been alarmed by the local post office, who, by accident, had found some damaged packages with what they suspected to be stolen goods. This led the detectives to investigate the Chileans through on-the-ground stakeouts, video surveillance, bugs in their flat, GPS tracking devices, and wiretaps. The case had come together beautifully. The detectives had the Chileans on tape talking about their crimes. They had footage of them storing, packing, and posting stolen goods. They even had footage of the Chileans breaking into houses—footage secured by stakeout teams who had been on their tail for months on end. As one of the stakeout team's detectives explained it to me:

One may well wonder why we just stay put, seeing them commit their crimes without apprehending them red-handed but, instead, only taking some photos of it all. In the eyes of the public, it surely doesn't look good, and it is also quite controversial, to be honest. Nevertheless, the reason why we have been allowed to do it like this is that it helps build a stronger case against the criminals. Committing one or two burglaries doesn't, in terms of the law, make for an organized crime conviction. But having them committing several burglaries does, especially if we can also prove that they are doing it as a group and that their reasons for visiting our country are criminal reasons. Then it's seen as organized crime. And then we can put them away for years rather than just months.

Accordingly, the Chileans were charged with organized property crime, leading to a satisfyingly hard conviction seen from the police and prosecutor's point of view (see also Sausdal 2023).

However, the Danish police did not charge the Chileans with all the burglaries (as well as other crimes) they had evidence of them committing. In fact, the police choosing not to pursue all possible charges in the cases they ran was not a fluke but a rather standard investigative practice. As an outsider, I found this perplexing and decided to ask the lead detective on the Chilean case why they did not use all the evidence they had. “Why not charge them with all of it?” I asked. He admitted:

Truthfully, this happens all the time. I understand how it looks. One would think that we'd like to close all the cases we have and pursue all charges. But in reality, that's not how it works. In big cases, for example, the case eventually reaches a saturation point. We then try to balance it all, so that we don't spend unnecessary time investigating and documenting matters we won't use anyhow . . . And it's a bit difficult. Sometimes we gather too much evidence. In terms of handing the cases over to the prosecutor and presenting it in court, this also means that we often only include a certain number of charges in a case complex, for instance, only including ten counts of burglary, thereby disregarding five other counts we otherwise know of. We do so because the extra work we would have to put in—writing them up, presenting them before the court, et cetera—wouldn't bring about a significantly harsher sentence. Whether it's 10 or 15 burglaries doesn't make much of a difference in the eyes of the court, really. So even though we know it may make a difference for, for example, the affected homeowners, it's not what ultimately matters in our work . . . We [pointing to himself as a police detective] work to lock people up as best possible. That's our focus.

In other words, if the police estimate that presenting more evidence and pursuing more charges will make it possible to (significantly) add to a criminal suspect's prison sentence, they will put
in the work. If not, odds are that the police will apply themselves otherwise. Of course, exceptions to this rule do exist. External or internal pressures may be applied to add more charges and close more cases. As much policing research has indeed shown, like many other forms of public administration (Danish) policing has increasingly become a neoliberal numbers game (Balvig et al. 2011; Reiner 1995). What I have nevertheless learned through my studies is that the choice to trim the case complex essentially revolves around the police trying to find what could be called “the perfect equilibrium” between securing a good/harsh conviction without putting in an unnecessary number of hours. In the next example, we will see how a similar investigative logic is at play.

Case 2: The Violent Robber Case

The downtown Copenhagen detectives had been looking for this particular suspect for several months. He had not just been known for robbing people on the streets of Copenhagen, often during the dark hours of the day; the suspect was notorious for doing it in what the detectives described as an “excessively violent way.” “He’s a real bastard this one!” the detectives frequently remind me and each other. The detectives had been on the case for quite a while and had already interviewed several of his victims who had been sharing their story and trauma. The detectives had also talked to potential witnesses. And they had printed out CCTV footage of the suspect, pictures now hanging on the office whiteboard held tight by shiny, red magnets.

During my time with these detectives, I had, just like they often did, found myself staring at these quite grainy pictures, thinking about where the suspect might be and if the detectives would have the good fortune to catch him. His name was written just above one of the pictures with a question mark behind it, signaling that the detectives were not 100 percent sure that this really was him. “But it is. It has to be!” one of the detectives insisted. “Look at the guy’s features and then look at this mug shot we have of him from when we last caught him and kicked his foreign ass in prison and out of Denmark.”

As I have discussed elsewhere (Sausdal 2018, 2021c, 2023), not all crimes truly bother police officers. Many crimes are, to the police, not that noteworthy and disturbing, as they have become part of their workaday lives. Yet, this case, this criminal, did frustrate them. His violent ways made the Danish detectives “really want to catch this foreign prick,” they said. “He needs to be punished” they resolved. And eventually they did catch him. His mug shot had been widely circulated in the district, leading to a patrol car spotting him just off Copenhagen’s city hall square. The patrolling officers called it in. And the detectives, with me on their tail, rushed from their office onto the streets, bringing the suspect back to the station in handcuffs 30 minutes later. “We got the sucker!” they cheered and complimented each other.

As is customary, the detectives then started to write up evidence they could bring before the judge. “Wait . . .” the most experienced detective suddenly said:

I mean, we already know this guy has an entry ban, right, given to him the last time he was on the prowl here in Denmark. Why don’t we just use that? Violating his entry ban by traveling into the country anyhow equals an automatic sentence. There’s nothing to be discussed. It’s easy like that. And, truth be told, it’s probably also a safer bet than presenting these unsharp pictures in court [pointing to the pictures on the whiteboard]. Really, the entry ban is the swift and bulletproof way to do this, guys!

And so this became what the Danish detectives did, getting the suspect convicted and deported. The detectives did this even though they had been so amenably infuriated with the suspect and his violent ways. Nevertheless, they saw the entry ban infraction as the right way to go (them
knowing that this would also satisfy the management, contributing to the crime stats and being cost effective). “We got him off the streets, which he’ll be for a long time. That’s what counts, no? This is also what I’ll tell his victims. Though their individual cases haven’t officially been solved, they can find solace in knowing that we got him anyhow.”

**The Bornholm Case**

Like the first example, the second example similarly illustrated how police detectives’ case logics circle less around victims’ feelings and public impressions and more around how to make a case as effectively as possible—with an eye to the end product as well as expenditures. With these examples fresh in mind, I now return to my starting point, that is, the Bornholm murder case.

“We do of course encounter other examples of extreme violence. But we rarely see violence of this magnitude,” the deputy state coroner explained before the court, also stressing that the victim’s many terrifying injuries were inflicted upon him while he was still alive. Ever since the story came out that a Black Danish man of Tanzanian ancestry had been found dead and mutilated in a remote forest on the small Danish island of Bornholm, Danish and international media had reported from the case. And it was not only the media that frequently engaged with the Bornholm murder: politicians, human rights advocates, academics, and other interested parties were weighing in on the case. The suspected murderers’ motives were being scrutinized, and so were the police’s and the public prosecutor’s—the police and prosecutor continuously relaying the message that they did not see this offence as a racially motivated hate crime.

Seen from the outside, the Danish criminal legal system’s reluctance to see the murder as being racially motivated seemed ludicrous if not reckless. The young Black man had been brutally murdered by two white and possibly, if not positively, racist men. Reports even came in that one of the perpetrators had placed his knee on the throat of the victim, mirroring at the time much-debated police killing of the Black American George Floyd. Knowing this, many were speaking out on the matter. For example, the then Department Director of Equal Treatment at the Danish Institute for Human Rights assertively declared on Twitter, before the initial verdict was even handed down: “First day of the trial of two brothers’ murder of a black man on Bornholm. I don’t know if it was fully or partially racially motivated. But we have a general problem with crimes PARTIALLY motivated by racism” (Ventegodt 2020; see also Barsøe 2020)—a comment and opinion mirrored by many other pundits. To them, fully or partially, it was essentially an issue of racism and, thus, a big issue that the police, the prosecutor, and many others in Danish society did not want to recognize it as such.

Being pushed by peers to comment on the case and being genuinely interested myself, I decided to conduct my own analysis. Doing so, I searched and examined the various publicly available statements given by the involved detectives. I also interviewed some of the Danish police detectives I had come to know—detectives not directly involved in this particular case but who nevertheless had insights into the case. Even though the detectives did understand why parts of the public and pundits were certain that the crime had to be racially motivated, the detectives also easily understood why their colleagues did not pursue this angle. As one of the detectives explained it to me:

A hate crime motive was surely explored, but to no avail. It might’ve been part of the deed. It might not. But, in this case, the case couldn’t be made . . . But, then again, it didn’t really matter, did it? The brothers got what they deserved, hate crime or not . . . Therefore, as we see it, and I’m sure I speak for all my colleagues here, all the commotion related to this case is much less about bad police work and much more an example of a politically correct yet factually
incorrect public frenzy. This also goes for the demonstrations against racism that the case has provoked, if you ask me. Though I admit that this case was a particularly odd and disgusting one, it is still an example of good, standard police work.

Reiterating what this article has already specified, in the Danish police’s perspective the Bornholm case was not a case of police prejudice. As indeed confidently stated in the national press by the chief inspector and head of the Bornholm murder investigation, Jacob Ipsen: “There is . . . nothing that points in the direction of racism” (Lange Olsen 2020). Instead of acknowledging any issues, the Danish police saw the case and the successful convictions of the two brothers as a great criminal justice victory, as “an example of good, standard police work.” The two brothers got 15 years in prison, amounting to one of the longest prison sentences allowed by Danish criminal law. From a professional and procedural police point of view, this—i.e., a harsh sentence—is fundamentally what matters to law enforcers, making both detectives and prosecutors feel happy about the end result (see also Sausdal 2023). Accordingly, this also helps explain why the Danish police acted somewhat perplexed when people direct “too much attention to the packaging rather than the product,” as another detective described it during our interview. “People seem to think that they know what we’re thinking, and that what we’re thinking is evil. But the thing is that they don’t really know how we think.”

**Police Rationality**

How do the police think then? What are their investigatory rationales? According to many of those who critiqued the Danish police in relation to their handling of the Bornholm murder case, the police tend to think and act in prejudiced and problematic ways. Thinking about the aforementioned theories on police racism, this is believed to be a way of thought cultivated by more or less corrupt police individuals, the organization itself, or the fact that the police are a part of wider racist and long-standing discriminatory structures in society, Denmark included (see Skadegård 2017).

Importantly, though I do not disagree with the legitimacy and importance of such critical theories; the empirical examples I provided in this article point to another principal aspect of police thinking. As a layperson to police work, one may expect that the police seek out convictions for all the crimes they have evidence of. If we bracket the very politically controlled or even corrupt police who discard cases if need be or create cases and evidence where there are none (Fassin 2013; Jauregui 2016; Klockars 1980), most people, at least most Danes (Justitsministeriet 2016), trust that the police investigate most if not all crimes when having evidence thereof. This is, however, not always/rarely the case. As the case with the Chilean burglars meant to illustrate, the police sometimes knowingly disregard already collected criminal evidence. They do so not because they are uninterested. Rather, they do so because they, together with the prosecutor, believe that adding more cases and further evidence to the larger case file will not strengthen the possibility of getting a (strong) conviction, of adding time to the potential prison sentence. “That’s pretty much standard procedure,” I was told. They “had enough,” Danish detectives often concluded, deliberately leaving evidence aside, leaving some cases open, leaving victims unsatisfied, yet, nevertheless, achieving their end goal (i.e., a harsh sentence).

In pointing to this sort of thinking, I am not saying that detectives think it is completely fine not to pursue all charges. In the best of worlds, they would probably like to include every last bit. Nonetheless, the governing police logic, their more or less official rule set, resembles that of an economistic bureaucrat more than the moral idealist, as similarly described in other
studies of public administration and similar street-level bureaucrats (Bierschenk 2019; Lipsky 2010; Mutsaers 2019). The police habitually think in “cases logics” rather than “human logics.” This was indeed a kind of rationalizing also present in the second case example provided. Here, Danish detectives were looking for a violent robber with a burning wish to bring him to justice. Nevertheless, despite such outspoken sentiments, the detectives decided to take the self-admitted “realistic” safe route, charging the otherwise much-loathed robber only with his entry ban violation rather than the newer string of robberies he was suspected of having committed. As the detectives were well aware of, this was not fully satisfying from a victim’s point of view, but, from a pragmatic criminal justice point of view, it was a (cost-)efficient decision. It was, as they themselves concluded, “the right decision.”

Looking at the Bornholm murder case, what, then, is the implication of the above? Why is it that Danish police detectives believed that “it didn’t really matter” whether racism was part of the motive when the two brothers decided to brutally maim and leave their so-called good friend to die? Although we cannot know for sure, I suspect that a contributing reason is the same reason provided in the two other provided case examples, as well as reasons richly described in other accounts of policing-cum-investigational logics (Bacon 2017; Ericson 1981; Hald 2011; Innes 2002, 2003; Manning 2006; Sheptycki 2004). In other words, the Danish detective’s uncaring comment about how “it didn’t really matter” was not necessarily so much about the detectives not thinking it actually mattered if racism was part of the equation or not, but, rather, that the potential hate crime motive did not really matter in terms of securing a satisfactory conviction. Indeed, as one of the world’s foremost scholars on police investigations and detective work, Innes (2003) has argued:

For detectives, law is enacted as a mode of rationality . . . The law as a mode of rationality provides an organizing perspective, or a way of thinking about, and thus acting out the investigative function. It inflects the way in which detectives approach and understand the investigative role, their actions, and the accounts they produce of their actions. (2002: 680)

This, Innes goes on arguing, is an investigative “mode of rationality,” or “a set of ordering codes” that not only “lifts specific events out of their contexts and situated histories,” but doing so with a specific teleological focus on how such decontextualized events can be used as efficiently as possible as criminal evidence. From the Danish police point of view, it may therefore have been the right and rational choice not to pursue the hate crime motive “simply” because they found it harder to prove, and thus entailing the risk of them wasting their time and muddling an otherwise clear-cut case. Alternatively, yet still being representative of the police’s particular mode of rationality, their disregard of the hate crime motive could also be because of how spending time proving it was not thought of as worthwhile in terms of it being an aggravating circumstance that would positively add to the final verdict. In any case, what guided the Danish detectives and the prosecutor’s office may well be labeled a specific form of teleological, bureaucratic logic—a logic that makes perfect sense to the police in relation to the internal goals they are trying to achieve even though they seem to outsiders irrational if not immoral.

Now, if it is true that such a goal-oriented rationality is what guided the Danish police’s (in)actions, one may therefore conclude that the police were biased, but perhaps not solely as many protesters and racism scholars wanted them to be. In this alternative interpretation of the events, what the Danish police were guilty of was less a matter of them thinking less of the murder victim because he was Black—and allowing this indifference to taint the investigation—but of the police not really thinking about it all. Instead, the Danish police did what they usually do. They kept their eyes on how they could build and win a case as expeditiously and judiciously as possible. This may have let them to ignore or downplay other possible motives—"motives of
importance to many people outside the police but not to the case,” as one of the interviewed detectives assertively expressed it.

**Slam Dunk Cases and Iron Cages**

Sometimes a case comes along that is a “slam dunk.” This is an expression I have heard more than a couple of times with police detectives explaining to me why they believe this or another case will surely end up with suspects being convicted of their crimes. “Slam dunk,” “sure thing,” “clear-cut,” and other similar expressions of certainty are also words used by detectives I have talked to about the Bornholm murder case.

The two brothers were kind of caught red-handed, right?! They kind of already confessed from the get-go . . . This was obviously a case that could never be lost—and a case where you almost know with full certainty that the judge is going to give a maximum sentence.

Or as one of the other detectives explained it: “There really wasn’t that much to think about. The brothers were always going to get a super harsh one—and deservedly so!”

Talking about the police’s specific way of thinking, that is, this existence of a particular mode of investigative “rationality,” clearly opens the door for larger Weberian discussion about the problems of bureaucratic rationalization and disenchantment. As Max Weber (1994; Höpfl 2006) famously contemplated, the calculating logics of capitalism and an increasing bureaucratization of society came with many positives as they introduced a more efficient, factual, and less nepotistic way of organizing human existence. However, because of what Weber saw as its organizational superiority, they also captured people into a certain kind of restrictive, teleological logic. To Weber (1994), bureaucratic thinking became an “iron cage,” a *stahlhartzes Gehäuse*, delineating an “inescapable fate” with little room for those thoughts and actions that fall outside the system’s self-serving reasonings. Indeed, “rational calculation,” Weber argued, “reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine” (1978: lix). Or as Niklas Luhmann (1990) comparably argued in his later systems theory, many systems, such as societal institutions and organizations, work through an “autopoietic” communicative code—a largely self-referential code (of conduct) that may end up producing outcomes that the system itself sees as reasonable while appearing unreasonable to those external to the system. Indeed, contrary to the Hegelian ideal of the “civil servant,” a “universal class” serving the interests of society as a whole (Hegel 2015), the Weberian bureaucrat is a servant of the system that employs him. He sees human lives as bureaucratic cases, as categories and numbers rather than existential and ethical complexity (see Sager and Rosser 2009).

Weberian critiques, or forewarnings, of the potential disenchantment and dehumanization integral to bureaucratic thinking have produced a tremendous amount of scholarly debate about the means and ends of bureaucratic rationalization (Billaud and Cowan 2020; Dubois 2016; Graeber 2012; Gupta 2012; Höpfl 2006; Lipsky 2010; Oberfield 2014). This also goes for policing research (Beek and Bierschenk 2020; Bierschenk 2019; Borrelli 2018; Deflem 2000; Hong 2017; Mutsaers 2019). One of the most telling examples thereof is the recurrent discussion about “police discretion” (Brayne 2020; Brown 1981; Davis 1975; de Maillard and Savage 2022; Gundhus et al. 2022; Holmberg 2000; Mastrofski 2004). As Michael Lipsky (2010) famously argued in his influential work on *Street-level Bureaucrats*, for bureaucracies to work, and to not become trapped into its own self-referential iron cage, front-end personnel must have the discretionary leeway to decide how a given human case fits into the system’s administrative schematics. This, the argument goes, is the only way to make sure that police, for example, retain a solitary eye for
the intricacies of human life beyond mere case logics, understanding a case not just according to regulations but also in relation to the specific human situation that it encompasses. Similar scholarly critiques have been raised in relation to other bureaucratic rationales such as new public management and otherwise actuarial understandings present not just in policing but in many other areas of public and private administration (Balvig et al. 2011; Feeley and Simon 1994; Hough 2010; McLaughlin and Levi 1995).

However, in discussing issues of police prejudice, critiquing a growing bureaucratization and regulation of police practice is not in any way straightforward. On the contrary, many scholars rightly point to how a lack of bureaucratic control and accountability comes with the risk of police discretion turning into discrimination (cf. Mastrofski 2004). When the police are not sufficiently engaged by regulatory principles, history is filled with examples of the police using their discretions to choose a course of action that turns police conduct into misconduct. This is why some policing scholars argue for more regulation of and less discretion given to police officers (cf. Mastrofski 2004). They, one might say, actually want the police to be mere cogs in a then hopefully less-discriminatory machinery.

The Bureaucratic Iciness of the Bornholm Case

“[A] polar night of icy darkness and hardness[!]” Weber (2004: xvi) used these dramatic and anglicized words to describe the potential aloofness of bureaucratic rationalization—a sort of cynical and purely case-oriented way for the bureaucrat or, in this case, the police detective to approach the tragic circumstances that the job often involves. To be sure, much has been written about how the police profession, or “police culture” (cf. Loftus 2009), includes the risk of police officers growing increasingly indifferent to the human misfortunes that are, inexorably, central to the police profession (Björk 2008; Muir 1979). The police do not really care, people say. Their iron cage becomes not merely a way for them to exclude other forms of thinking but also a way of shielding themselves against the hardships of their job (Björk 2008).

Turning to the question of the Bornholm murder case, above discussions about the means and ends of police rationality shed a potentially added light on the Danish police’s conduct. If asked, I at least suspect that what may have caused the Danish police not to pursue a hate crime charge to the case against the two brothers has more to do with Weberian readings of bureaucratic iciness than, for example, Arendtian ideas about bureaucratic evil (Arendt and Kroh 1964). An Arendtian reading would describe the Danish police’s denial of the racist motive as an example of how the circadian procedures of their job has made them unaware of and indifferent to the harm they produce. Nevertheless, in an Arendtian reading, the police are ultimately in the business of hurting people, even though bureaucratic routines and rules have made them unmindful—an understanding of a systematized immorality like the aforementioned critiques of institutionalized and structural racism (cf. Bowling et al 2005 Feagin 2013, Skadegård 2017). Individual bureaucratic actors such as a police officer may not think that what they do is wrong, but they are nonetheless guilty of reproducing an unjust system. As Arendt argued, Eichmann’s gullibility did not excuse him. He deserved punishment.

However, in a more Weberian reading of bureaucratic rationality, the system may produce harms, yet, unlike Arendt, harming people is not necessarily integral to the system. It may be, but it is not always what the bureaucracy aims at producing. Instead, the central problem is that the system’s teleological and calculating logics make the bureaucrat largely indifferent to other forms of thinking, to other sentiments and perspectives. Again, this could very well help explain what happened in the Bornholm murder case. Applying their own autopoietic mode of reasoning, the Danish criminal justice actors made choices that, from their point of view, served
the case, the later conviction, and their own institution more than public sentiments. As I have myself experienced, and as it has been criticized by many policing researchers (Cockcroft 2020; Loftus 2009; Reiner and Newburn 2008), the police surely have a both inward-looking as well as self-justifying way of seeing the world. The police not only tend to interpret and act in the world according to their own standards but also are not experts in appreciating how things may look from another perspective.

**Closure**

More than a year after the homicide, the two now convicted brothers’ mother officially reported the murder victim to the police, stating that she had in fact been raped by the murder victim before his death. She also argued that this was the reason for her sons’ rage and that racism accordingly did not have anything to do with it (Vestergaard Larsen 2020). This, however, is not an interpretation of the events shared by the murder victim’s parents, who through their attorney have stated how they do see racism as a motive. “The extreme forcefulness and incredible cruelty, seen here in relation to [their son] have given the parents’ the impression that there is an element of looking down and not respecting [their son] as a human being,” their statement dictates. These conflicting viewpoints are now even to be glimpsed in the prosecutor’s interpretation of things, who recently specified how the state “can’t with any certainty say what the motive behind the murder was.” Nevertheless, the prosecutor quickly reiterated, “according to the prosecutors’ office interpretations, there is nothing that points toward racism being a motive” (Berlingske 2021).

As the above words and views again illustrate, it is difficult to tell what motivated the two brothers. At the end, only they know. While admitting to this, I have nonetheless tried to offer a so far unexpressed explanation of why the Danish police and prosecutor did not decide to pursue the hate crime motive. Rather than “simply” explaining such inaction as yet another tragic case of police prejudice, as many pundits have maintained, I have made an empirical effort to demonstrate how such a choice may also be explained by the existence of a specific mode of investigative rationality. This is a kind of Weberian, bureaucratic reasoning ultimately aimed at producing a, for the Danish criminal legal system, wished-for outcome, namely the harshest possible sentence while using their resources as cost-effectively as possible. Importantly, I do not argue that this specific rationality is the only explanation of why the Danish police and prosecutor disregarded racism as a motive, yet I do suggest that it could help us better understand the police’s practice.

Now, if the police’s practices in relation to the Bornholm murder case may indeed be recognized as a peculiar yet conventional case of police logics and not just prejudice, what can be concluded from this? In other words, how may we use such insight both in terms of our theories of and fight against (police) racism?

The Bornholm murder case is not just a harrowing tragedy but also a potentially problematic example of academic critique because it illustrates the well-known dangers of motive speculation, even in outwardly “slam dunk” cases. While wholly acknowledging the history of police and societal racism that drove various stakeholders to read the Bornholm case as yet another tragic example of police discrimination, I also found it troubling to encounter university colleagues concluding so even before the details of the case had been presented and a verdict passed. Though I understand the emotional and political sentiment behind “activist” or “militant” anthropological calls for choosing sides or “the primacy of the ethical” (Schepé-Hughes 1995, 2009), I, like others (cf. Fassin 2008, 2013; Latour 2005; Ramphele 1996), frequently find it
both largely unproductive and even somewhat un-anthropological. Usually, the anthropological raison d'etre has traditionally been to understand the inside perspectives of the different lives we set out to study, setting aside, as best possible, our own perspectives. This does not mean that the anthropologist is not allowed to critique or condemn. But it does mean that critique and condemnation come not a priori but a posteriori—valuing “the primacy of ethnography” (Kapferer 2007; Sausdal and Vigh 2019; Vigh and Sausdal 2018, 2021 over theory deduction and instinctive partisanship.

In current academic-cum-anthropological debates about racism, however, one often gets the sense that the importance of ethnography (or empirical “evidence”) of unearthing and unfolding the other perspective before formulating our critiques has been slightly forgotten. This is unfortunate, as the primacy of ethnography is not merely foundational to anthropological thinking but also arguably one of anthropology’s greatest political potentials (Sausdal 2019). Indeed, as Eric Wolf (1956) originally argued, a unique political potential of anthropology is that of “the broker,” allowing the anthropologist to explain and thus mediate between perspectives, or in the words of this article, specific “modes of rationality.” Importantly, this is not the same as saying that one must appreciate both perspectives equally. Rather, the idea is that change is often more easily facilitated when all parties in a conflict feel at least somewhat heard and recognized. And though it is certainly appropriate to criticize the police for myopically tending to their own professional logics, them being unable to appreciate how such logics produce outcomes that to many others appear iniquitous, such nearsightedness is currently to be expected. More than many other bureaucratic institutions, the police are notorious for minding their own business.

Therefore, a suitable criticism would be to encourage the (Danish) police to learn how to think and communicate about their work in less insular ways (see Mawby 2014). Communicating more openly would probably have helped ease many tempers in the Bornholm murder case. There is, however, no reason for anthropology to become more like the police, becoming increasingly limited and presupposed in our way of seeing things. That said, it is often appropriate to fault the police for furthering prejudiced practices. However, this it is not always the case—or at least not always the full story. And for a strand of social science so strongly and uniquely committed to the empirical, to the particulars and nuances brought forth by field studies more than the purely theoretical, it seems similarly appropriate to let each empirical case speak for itself, the Bornholm murder case included. If we do not do this, we as anthropologists and anti-racism scholars may end up being caught in an iron cage of our own, serving mostly our own causes, minding or own cases.

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NOTE

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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