Abstract
Transnational police readily use martial language in the stories they tell about their work. Their actual work, however, tells a different and less dramatic story. Why, then, do they insist on these warlike tales? Why is there a discrepancy between the self-representation of transnational policing and its reality? Using an ethnographic study, this article provides some answers. First, it includes an overview of three established explanations of the inclination of transnational police to represent their work in warlike terms. Next, an additional reading is presented. Building on Reiner's discussion of “police fetishism”, this reading proposes that transnational policing actors have an idée fixe about their own professional inevitability. They blindly believe that policing must exist, but also that it has to be done combatively to truly work. In conclusion, the article contemplates what the existence of such a “fighting fetish” means in both theoretical and reform terms.

Keywords
police culture, police fetishism, presentation of self, transnational ethnography, transnational policing, warfare

Introduction: Ready for combat!
To set the context, let us first consider something I was told during my ongoing ethnographic study of European transnational policing. In this case, I received two explanations
which, though representing the work of transnational policing in very different ways, were given to me by the same transnational policing actor, in this case a Europol officer:

1. This is where we are most days [using his eyes to indicate the office], sitting in front of our computers, close to our phones. If not, we’re probably attending yet another meeting in one of the conference rooms downstairs. Or maybe we’re chatting to a colleague, turning over some information we’ve been asked for, gathering some ourselves, forwarding requests or maybe just having a chat. That’s honestly how it is most days.

2. Trust me, we’re the last line of defense! The work we do is what’s needed in this day and age. I’m not saying we don’t need preventive work, meetings, diplomacy, information sharing, analyses and other such softer and bureaucratic approaches. That’s also part of it. But most of all we’re here to put up a fight against the kinds of crimes that know no limits. These are crimes that don’t wait for us to finish legal debates and so on . . . For transnational crime the rule is that there’s no rule . . . And this is why we need more men, more hi-tech solutions, the best weapons, and more resources in general . . . If we’re to bring about change, we need to be fully equipped, ready for combat!

Taken together, these two dissimilar representations of transnational policing give the gist of this article’s theoretical interest. On the one hand, they convey the different kinds of work involved in transnational policing. As research has firmly established, transnational policing is not just a matter of crime fighting, but very much a matter of intelligence work, information management, preventing and preempting future or further harms, as well as promoting collaboration between public and private stakeholders (see Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012; Franko and Gundhus, 2015; Lemieux, 2013; McDaniel et al., 2019).

On the other hand, the two illustrations also exemplify what I have repeatedly experienced during my last six years of ethnographically researching transnational policing efforts at both the national and international level across Europe: namely that transnational police—be it a local Danish, Romanian, Spanish or Portuguese detective involved in transnational policing activities or a Europol, Frontex or Interpol employee—tend to represent the quintessence of their work in martial terms. Transnational police do indeed communicate the necessity of, for example, “preventive work, meetings, diplomacy, information sharing, analyses and other such softer and bureaucratic approaches”, nevertheless, one is left with the impression that, to them, transnational policing is first of all a “combat”, a “fight”. This is an observation also made by other scholars of transnational policing who point to the fact that such war-talk is not just prevalent but even more accentuated in transnational policing than in other forms of policing, in the sense that transnational policing is repeatedly portrayed as central to the fight against the great harms of transnational crime (see Andersson, 2014a, 2016; Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012; Feldman, 2019; Sheptycki, 2000a, 2007a, 2017; Walker, 2012).

As part of a special issue exploring representations or “theatrics” of transnational criminal justice, this article examines this combative dramaturgy. Why, it asks, do transnational police often present their work in warlike terms, though they are also engaged in work that is much less dramatic yet, by their own admission, also of significance? Looking at their actual work, one could even claim that the majority of transnational
policing work is not so much about a war on transnational crime as about these so-called “bureaucratic approaches”. For example, as the then Secretary General of Interpol Jürgen Stock emphasized in their 2019 Annual report: “Information is the lifeblood of [transnational] policing and we will continue to work with our member countries to ensure that the right information is in the right hands at the right time” (Interpol, 2019: 3)—a “knowledge-based” (Gundhus, 2012) or “intelligence-led” (Ratcliffe, 2016) emphasis similarly found when other pundits and scholars point to the function and future of this line of police work (see McDaniel et al., 2019). Still, whether or not information is the actual lifeblood of transnational policing, a large number of both higher and lower ranked transnational police actors I encountered during my fieldwork appear to favor vocational stories of a more action-based and warlike character. They are, they say, “ready for combat!”

In analyzing the high levels of martial talk by transnational police, this article is structured as follows: first, it describes the ethnographic study that underlies it, arguing for the need to conduct what Feldman (2011a, 2011b) has called “nonlocal ethnography” to study widespread yet interwoven sociocultural phenomena in a global age (such as transnational policing). Second, additional empirical examples are provided of how transnational police represent their work in warlike terms. Third, the article presents an overview of three conventional explanations of why this is. Fourth, and in conclusion, an alternative explanation is laid out, arguing for, and discussing the problematic existence of, what is conceptualized as a “fighting fetish”.

A study of (the representations of) transnational policing

From around the turn of the millennium, policing scholars as well as criminologists started to take a serious interest in issues of globalization (see Aas, 2013; Bosworth, 2017; McDonald, 1995; Pakes, 2012; Pickering et al., 2014; Sheptycki, 2002). Unlike other social sciences which were already in the 1980s grappling with the scholarly consequences of an increasingly globalizing world (see Kearney, 1995; Marcus, 1989), the problems of criminology’s “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) had, until recently largely been sidestepped. In the words of Aas (2012: 8), criminologists have however started to realize that:

[to]transnational interconnectedness and interdependence challenge established national frameworks of thought and demand an outward looking perspective, [pushing us] to develop methodological, theoretical and conceptual approaches which transcend the established ethnocentric frameworks and are built on a more expansive and inclusive geographical imagination.

One way of acquiring “a more expansive and inclusive geographical imagination” has been by arguing for a “travelling” criminological ethnography (Aas, 2011: 407)—that is, a not only theoretical but truly transnational criminology with the ethnographer physically charting and contemplating the consequences of criminal(izing) flows (see also Sausdal and Vigh, 2019). Different attempts to do so have been tried and tested, a particularly promising one being that of anthropologist and transnational criminal justice
scholar Gregory Feldman’s (2011a, 2011b) “nonlocal ethnography” in which he builds on Marcus’ (1995) idea of “multi-sited fieldwork” as well as Glick Schiller et al.’s (1992) work on “transnationalism”.

This article and its underlying study of transnational policing (Sausdal, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b) observes the call for a more travelling and transnational criminology by applying Feldman’s concept of nonlocal ethnography. In order to study transnational phenomena, Feldman argues, there is a need for ethnography to rethink not only its Malinowskian (2002) devotion to situatedness and localism, but also its implicit ideas about the necessity of “connections” (Feldman, 2011a). In other words, in a globalized world, it is problematic that ethnographers have largely remained wedded to the idea that an empirical field has to consist in tangible connections between its various actors—problematic because many global or transnational processes are not made up of connections in this sense. The effects of globalization are not merely that we live in an interconnected “global village” (McLuhan and Powers, 1989) where we may meet and greet across vast distances. Rather, globalizing processes often consist in what Feldman (2011a) terms “apparatuses” of “mediating agents” such as distributed politics, economics, moral concepts, technologies and codes of conduct—mediating agents which indirectly yet analogously assemble otherwise “disconnected actors” (Feldman, 2011a) and the things they do, think, feel and say into a shared realm across space and time (see also Andersson, 2014b; Olwig et al., 2019).

That transnational apparatuses sometimes lack observable connections, yet have a collective influence on the people/professionals sharing in their mechanics, is precisely what makes Feldman propose his nonlocal ethnography; nonlocal referring to a style of travelling ethnography including numerous, dispersed observations of, and interviews with, different actors arguably belonging to and concurrently making up the apparatus. Feldman (2011b) himself applies his approach to the transnational study of the European Union’s shared migration control efforts, with him journeying around Europe to witness the work of different “policy actors”. Comparably, my own nonlocal ethnography of transnational policing efforts around Europe consists in a multitude of observations (around 1000 hours in total so far) and interviews (45) of what I (with Feldman’s methodology in mind) term transnational policing actors—transnational police actors all employed in similar ways to detect, investigate, apprehend and prevent a variety of transnational crimes such as terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, people smuggling and mobile organized criminal groups (MOCGs). In even more concrete terms, my research includes ethnographic material collected through long-term observations and interviews with more than 75 local and national transnational police actors involved in transnational policing efforts in Denmark, Romania, Spain and Portugal as well as interviews with 20 transnational police actors employed at the following international policing or criminal justice organizations: Interpol, Europol, Eurojust, Frontex, MAOC-N, EMCDDA and UNODC.

The socio-spatiality of transnational policing

This study’s inclusion of interlocutors—or actors—employed not only at the official transnational level but also at the local and national level may at first glance seem odd. It
certainly goes against the conventional scholarly way of looking at transnational policing as a matter of researching the established international organizations (such as Interpol) or the work of liaison officers. However, as Bowling and Sheptycki have argued, there is a need for studies of transnational policing to move beyond framing and studying transnational policing in narrow terms (Bowling, 2009; Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012). To better understand the phenomenon in its entirety, they suggest, police researchers should study the full “socio-spatiality” of transnational policing (Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012). This includes what they conceptualize as “the global” (such as Interpol), “the regional” (such as Europol), “the national” (such as a country’s National Police Agency and its transnational policing efforts) as well as “the glocal” (a given local police unit investigating transnational crimes) level of transnational policing, involving the work of both actual police officers and civilian experts (Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012).

Paying attention to the work and views of various European-based transnational police actors represents the broader socio-spatiality (or apparatus) that my study has sought to examine. Nevertheless, studying transnational policing by means of compiling ethnographic data from a believed apparatus of different actors working in different locations and with different positions, ranks and ways of thinking, involves several potential methodological pitfalls (see also Feldman, 2011a). For instance, extending one’s empirical field beyond a demarcated place, group or situation involves risks of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. As the circle encompassing one’s field widens, the number of actors and acts multiplies, inevitably including the risk of the study not containing enough perspectives to be able to claim to have seen the bigger picture. Charting the existence of a dispersed transnational policing apparatus also risks muting variances in the pursuit of similarities. In relation to this article’s focus on martial representations of transnational policing, this includes the specific danger of overemphasizing this warlike discourse, muting the voices that tell other and less combative stories about transnational policing. This risk I acknowledge. However, for all its faults, the application of a non-local or similarly motile means of ethnography seems indispensable in an ethnographic criminological attempt to look for that which not only diverges but links up in an increasingly intersecting and flowing world.

On moats and mundanity

During more than six years of meeting and speaking with various transnational police actors from all around Europe, I more often than not encountered a warlike storyline. Other stories of transnational policing were certainly conveyed. Yet, the martial always cropped up. In my notebooks and audio recordings I have numerous examples of this. The following statements by, respectively, a Portuguese national police investigator involved in transnational policing investigations in and around Lisbon and a Spanish Frontex officer struck me as particularly illustrative:

Having done this for many years, first in my own country and now here, I know what we’re up against. What you see here may all seem very serene and clerical. Sometimes it is. But the people we’re up against are not like that. They’re relentless. They are not just paper pushers. For them, it’s business. Dirty business, where no holds are barred. So we have to
be relentless too—careful, alert and ready to do what it takes. We’re involved in a war whether we like it or not.

I know there’s talk about how crime has decreased and all that, but, seen from where we stand, I can tell you that if we relax the pressure, things will blow up. The criminals are just waiting to pounce, waiting for openings and weaknesses. And looking at transnational forms of crime more specifically, this is the future of policing. This is where it will all be played out!

A similar representative dynamic is at play as in this article’s introductory quotes. Outwardly, these two statements graphically represent the work of transnational policing as a matter of “war”, being “relentless”, “alert”, not being “weak” or, God forbid, relaxing the “pressure”. Transnational police simply have to be “ready to do what it takes”.

Beneath the confrontational talk, however, another reality seemingly hides. In my experience, the warlike necessity of their profession was not infrequently presented by them at the same time as they pointed, yet downplayed, less dramatic parts of their job. In the first statement, for example, the Portuguese investigator was directing my attention to how his office pretty much looked like any other office fitted with computers, phones, folders and piles of paper. During my time researching transnational policing efforts, I had indeed seen many offices like that and observed first-hand how their work most-often consists in rather conventional, “clerical” office work, as he put it—pretty much doing the daily bidding of any ordinary bureaucrat. His Spanish Frontex colleague also emphasized the more dire aspects of the job with reference to the widely discussed worldwide “crime drop” (Van Dijk et al., 2012), yet making sure that I understood that the fight was, nevertheless, still very much on.

The discrepancy between the reality and representation of their work is of course not just a matter of how transnational police express themselves. The warlike symbolism may also be seen in the “spectacular” (Boyle and Haggerty, 2009) architecture of transnational police buildings and security measures (see Headley et al., 2020; Millie, 2012) as well as in how they curate themselves in public, for instance on social media (Bullock, 2018; Mawby, 2013; Walsh, 2020). A particularly evocative example of the former is that of Europol’s headquarters in The Hague. While the organization was formed in 1998 on the back of TREVI, its new 32,000 m² headquarters was only completed and made operational in 2011. It was opened by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and strategically located in The Hague’s international zone just next to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), signaling the specific focus and weightiness of the Europol agenda.

Another way in which the Europol headquarters signals its weight and worth is by its design and means of security. What may best be described as a moat surrounds the towering, grey building, yet with a small house located outside its inner perimeter. This is the home of an airport-like security check with armed guards, a conveyer belt and body scanners. Yet, this is not the only security check that a visitor has to go through (not to mention the initial security clearance that happens before permission is granted to visit). Having been cleared at this first checkpoint and escorted over the modern-day moat and into the actual headquarters, one has to go through a couple more checkpoints to get the
appropriate credentials to be able to enter one’s designated location, the entire time accompanied by at least one Europol employee. As a Europol officer explained to me as I finally arrived at the office I was supposed to visit, “we take security issues super serious here!” I could only agree. “But when you’re inside, you’ll see that it’s not that dramatic and dangerous after all. We do sit on some valuable material, but it’s also a workplace pretty much like any other”, she later continued with her colleagues nodding. By and large, her words mirrored what other transnational police actors told me, one admitting that he also, in having visited many of the world’s transnational policing organizations, got the feeling of it “appearing almost like a total security theater. With security measures stricter than those in an international airport and this crude fortress-like feeling, it tells its own obvious story, right? It sets an example.”

It did set an example—that of transnational policing being involved in a particularly perilous conflict with the concomitant need to stay constantly on guard. One transnational policing organization I visited (which name I am not here allowed to mention) took such precautions to the next level, making efforts to not only fortify its headquarters but to keep their exact location a secret. As I was told by its management upon leaving:

You can’t tell anyone about where we’re located. Not anyone. Not even your wife. It’s not that our work is completely cloak-and-dagger-like. You’ve seen the inside of our offices. What we basically do here is to funnel information. Nevertheless, there’s no need to let our adversaries know where we are. It’s better like that, staying out of sight.

Looking at the (social) media presence of transnational police organizations, the image of transnational policing as its own sort of warfare is often also what transpires. One telling example is that of a recent Europol photo contest. Here, Europol was calling on people to submit photographs showcasing its work. Announcements of the contest gave examples of what this could be, showing some powerful pictures, one being that of a masked police officer holding a barking German shepherd dog on a leash. While they were beautifully done, what was also striking about the pictures was how Europol wanted people to represent “the work of Europol” while using extreme examples fairly different from Europol’s daily work. As for example admitted by the Europol officer in this article’s introduction, the work of Europol is arguably less about masked officers with barking dogs and more of a bureaucratic sort (see Anderson et al., 1996; Brady, 2008; Deflem, 2006; Den Boer and Bruggeman, 2007; Woodward, 1993).

A similar overdramatization was also part of a Frontex recruitment campaign, which on Twitter showed a videoclip of a helicopter hovering over open waters with armed officers hanging on a rope beneath it. As Franko in this special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* also argues, such spectacular and even paramilitary presentation of self is quite different from much of the actual work of this particular transnational policing organization—work which, according to my own observations and the occasional admission of Frontex officers themselves, “most typically consists of rather mundane and repetitive processing of migrants who, most of the time, don’t have to be rescued but who have themselves found their way across onto our [European] shores” (see also Aas and Gundhus, 2015; Andersson, 2014b; Olwig et al., 2019).
Three conventional explanations

Why is transnational policing nonetheless framed in warlike terms? What makes its different actors—be it a Danish or Portuguese detective or a Frontex or Europol employee—speak of their work in combative ways, even though they, at the same time, seem fairly aware of how the work itself is often of a different and, at least sometimes, more mundane character? Reviewing the literature, three conventional explanations exist. These are that of (1) “moral entrepreneurship”, (2) “symbolic mending” and (3) “police culture”—three explanations that apply to transnational policing in particular, yet which also relate to, and draw on, studies of conventional policing and the conventional police’s similarly noted propensity for the contentious.

Moral entrepreneurs

In Outsiders, Becker (2008 [1963]) presented the concept of “moral entrepreneurs”; that is, socio-political actors who seek to influence others to adopt given behavioral norms. Becker (2008 [1963]) originally divided them into “rule crusaders” and “rule enforcers”, arguing that the former were influential moralists from the upper strata of society, such as law makers, religious leaders and other similar politically and culturally powerful bodies. The latter, such as the police, Becker saw as less entrepreneurial in their formation of moral codes but, as the name suggests, “simply” enforcing them.

However, in studies of both conventional policing (see Fassin, 2018; Flyghed, 2002; Kraska, 1996) and transnational policing (Andreas and Nadelmann, 2006; Manning, 2000; Nadelmann, 1990, 2010; Sheptycki, 2000b) it has often been argued that the police are not just passive participants in the spread and, indeed, policing of new and old norms. Rather, they take an active part in promoting their normative views about the well-being of the world and, not least, about how the malaise that they identify should be dealt with. Lately, this was at the heart of Fassin’s (2013) Enforcing Order, an ethnography of policing in the banlieues of Paris. From a more transnational perspective, this has been central to Nadelmann’s work on international criminal justice in which he describes international criminal justice actors, such as the police, as “transnational moral entrepreneurs” (see Nadelmann, 1990, 2010)—moral entrepreneurs who, due to the discursive dominance as well as geographical spread of their work, may have the opportunity to influence even more people (Nadelmann, 1990, 2010). The concept of moral entrepreneurship thus helps explain why the transnational police I encountered communicated as they did. It also explains why scholars have argued that transnational police are not only at the forefront of the “war on drugs” or “war on terror”, but actively promote such military language (see Sheptycki, 2007b).

Symbolic mending

The second explanation of the transnational police’s warlike self-representations is, at first sight, similar. Yet, instead of looking at policing dramas as examples of moralizing or even “militarizing” (Kraska, 2007; Walker, 2012), this approach focuses on police performativity as being a matter of “symbolic mending”—following for example Manning’s work (see 1997, 2000, 2001) in which he frequently describes how the
practice and efficiency of policing rests upon a display of the police’s power through visible symbols such as the uniform and the badge, and confrontation. In such a symbolic interactionist interpretation, manifestations of power are first and foremost understood as ways in which the police communicate and affirm their authority and secure the public’s compliance.

Furthermore, and of specific interest when discussing warlike imagery, symbolic displays by the police risk becoming even more spectacular in times of crisis (Loftus et al., 2015; Manning, 2012). If, for example, the police feel their capacity is faltering, their authority is not respected or that there is a decrease in public trust, the police may compensate by added exhibitions of strength—mending a substantive deficit by symbolic means. In Manning’s (2001: 317–318) words, the police thus manage “uncertainties by manipulating symbols and rhetoric representing their actions as coherent, rational and co-ordinated”. Much the same has been argued in relation to transnational policing. Here, scholars have noted how transnational policing often lacks proper legal, material and public foundation and then considered dramatic self-representation as a means of symbolically mending, or maybe even masking, internal deficits (see Sheptycki, 2004; Walker, 2012). This also relates to studies of transnational criminal justice more broadly where one of the problems inherent to transnational criminal justice, and a potential reason for its frequent theatrical displays, is believed to be its insubstantial legal base and lack of international support (see Boer and Stolk, 2019).

**Police culture**

The third explanation to be found in the literature takes—like most theory on policing—its starting point in studies of regular police/patrol work. Here, the predominance of warlike representations is discussed with reference to the particularities of “police culture” (see Cockcroft, 2020; Loftus, 2009); that is, arguing that many police forces adhere to professional norms and values such as conservatism, skepticism, a hunger for action, as well as tendencies toward an us-versus-them worldview (Cockcroft, 2020; Loftus, 2009).3 These are the combative values of so-called “real police work” (Van Maanen, 1978) that police officers become socialized into and which therefore, alongside legal codes and regulations, become a basis for their professional self-understanding and presentation-of-self. In terms of the interest of this article, research has shown how the attitudes of conventional police culture have to a large extent also become the basis of “transnational police culture” (Sheptycki, 1997), explaining at least in part the warlike portrayals discussed in this article. This, indeed, is one of the central arguments of Bowling and Sheptycki’s (2012) seminal work on Global Policing, which claims that a main driver of the shape and substance of transnational policing has been the influence that regular law enforcement practices and perceptions have had, and continue to have, on its development (see also Nadelmann, 2010).

**Another explanation: A fighting fetish**

The three conventional explanations have brought policing research and criminology a long way in understanding the existence of warlike tales in policing, and in transnational
policing. Yet, despite their continuous relevance, the explanations seem to share a theoretical blind spot—a blind spot which concerns how they all tend to understand dramatic policing representations as, more or less, a consciously willed configuration. Though the transnational police’s war talk is arguably an example of something willed, if not willfulness, it is, I believe, not necessarily always an expression of conscious or curated thinking.

In his celebrated discussion of The Politics of the Police, Reiner (2010: 3) has argued that there exists in contemporary western society a “police fetishism”. This police fetishism is, he asserts, upheld by “the ideological assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order so that without a police force chaos would ensue” (2010: 3; see also Garriott, 2013; Karpiak and Garriott, 2018). This fetishization of policing may be illustrated in many ways, one particularly telling one being the fact that a police force has long been, and still is, one of the first governmental institutions erected when we (i.e. the West) “offer” our help to countries and regions of the world where states are in turmoil or have failed (see also Stambøl and Solhjell, this issue). Thinking through anthropologist David Graeber’s (2005) work on the generative aspects of “social fetishes”, one may even argue that policing has become not just a naturalized form of governmental technology but a specifically fetishized form of sociality—something most/many of us readily relate to as a natural and powerful social manifestation sustained not by the people engaging in it but by its own inevitability. First policing, then society, to put it in blunt terms.

From Reiner’s point of view, the idea of the police as the proverbial thin blue line that keeps society from descending into chaos is not just a blind belief held by most members of society but of course also something the police themselves truly believe in. They too have an idée fixe about the societal inevitability of their own profession. Unlike many other professionals (this article’s author included), who regularly question the worth of their work, the police, though frequently disheartened and cynical about the ways of the world and the outcomes of their toils (see Björk, 2008), ultimately trust in their vocational indispensability as they are “keeping the underbelly of this world in check, us being the last line of defense”, as I personally have been told on several occasions in more or less these words.

Yet, the police are not just a socio-political fetish in the simple institutional sense. Their fetishization includes the additional belief that policing must be done in particular ways if it is to be effective; that is, to make up this alleged “last line of defense”. Though Reiner is at times less explicit on this point, it seems clear that a fetishization of policing is simultaneously a fetishization of the battle-ready, crime fighting police more than, for example, a sort of policing which takes its starting point in Bantonian (1964) ideas about “keeping the peace” or in the protection and enforcement of democracy and human rights (see Bowling and Sheptycki, 2016; Brodeur, 2000; Loader, 2002; Sheptycki, 1997). To be sure, as governing concepts of policing so often include the centrality and value of, for example, “winning the war on crime”, the battle has become part of what is believed to be the very DNA of police work—a battling belief held both by society at large (promoted by many politicians, the media and popularized by many movies, TV shows and books) and, even more so, by the police themselves in their own understandings and presentations of themselves. The battlefield, as such, is not only something the police
venture onto. In their own and many others’ understanding, they are already and inevitably there, appreciating the fight as an a priori rather than a posteriori issue.

Just as such a “fighting fetish” can be said to dominate much societal thinking (conventional policing included), it unavoidably also shapes the mindset of transnational policing; maybe even increasingly so. As transnational crimes are discursively framed as an ultimate “folk devil” (Cohen, 2002) in a global day and age, and even as a type of criminal warfare (see Heine and Thakur, 2011), the odds are that transnational policing actors increasingly yet insentiently perceive themselves as the necessary opponent. They “have” to fight. They “need” to wage war, they regularly told me in a language of inevitability, even when admitting that their work involves and, arguably, necessitated many other things.

In this way, seeing transnational policing as a fight has seemingly become ingrained; a warlike representation of themselves and their profession that, at least most of, the transnational police I encountered steadfastly if not automatically clung to. This is the fighting fetish that, due to its discursive dominance, remains an imponderable truth even when the facts seldom support it. In my efforts to make sense of the persistent portrayals of transnational policing as a warlike endeavor (be it in spoken or written words, gestures, pictures or through physical manifestations) I indeed kept getting the impression that their warlike storyline had to be upheld by a blind if not almost magical belief in its truth. Their denial of alternative facts seemed neither false nor forced. Despite its contested nature, they appeared utterly sincere when pointing to transnational policing as warfaring.

Different how?

Now, as the reader has perhaps already noticed, the three conventional explanations of transnational police representations outlined above are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they largely build on and add to one another—and the same may be said of the “fighting fetish” explanation. As its own theory of why transnational police deal in martial descriptions, it does however have some distinguishing features. While this author readily accepts that the transnational police are also, for instance, moral entrepreneurs (promoting their understandings of the world and, thereby, their own worth as a blue and battle-ready line between order and chaos), the concept of a “fighting fetish” adds to, and even complicates, this explanation. Effectively, the idea of moral entrepreneurship hinges on the notion that policing actors are at least somewhat knowingly pushing an agenda. Doing so, it builds on traditional performance theory ideas (see Goffman, 1978; Schechner, 2003) about the existence of a dramaturgical difference between the backstage and frontstage of policing with moral entrepreneurs behind the scenes curating portrayals for subsequent public consumption. As already described, it is even frequently argued that the transnational police’s pushing of an agenda often includes aspects of exaggeration, with them overemphasizing certain issues to promote their point of view and product. In dramaturgical terms, seeing transnational police as exhibiting moral entrepreneurship requires us to credit them with an analytical focus and to consider, for example, their “dramaturgical actions”, the “masks” they wear and the way they perform “expressive control” (Goffman, 1978), as social interactions designed to be seen and to leave their mark.
While there is much truth to this, such an explanation may also be too Machiavellian. Understanding their self-representation purely as a matter of a dramaturgically apt moral entrepreneurship is inevitably accompanied by ideas about the transnational police being fairly astute thespians or sometimes even mendacious manipulators. Yet, if we accept that some of their representations are due to a fetishization of, rather than a dramatization of, “the fight”, this troubles the entrepreneurship explanation. It does so as the fetishization of the fight, this combat obsession, breaks down the assumed distinction between the veiled veracity of the backstage versus the manufactured portrayals of the frontstage, between the mask and its bearer. Indeed, if the fight is more of a blind belief than the mark(eting) of morality, there is no real difference between what is represented when standing in front of or behind the scenery. Seen from the perspective of the “fighting fetish”, transnational police actors (sometimes) simply utter what they almost religiously believe is the truth, leaving the differences between transnational police practice and presentation to be explained as an obsession rather than as an act of deliberate manipulation.

Much the same can be said about theories of symbolic mending. Like moral entrepreneurship, symbolic mending explanations also often rely upon performance theory, though in reverse. Instead of arguing that the theatrics of transnational policing representations are first and foremost crafted in a spirit of entrepreneurship—as a “performative act” as Butler (2011) would have it—theories about symbolic mending reason that the transnational police through their dramatic representations are not (only) trying to advance an externally oriented agenda but also seeking to mask an internal deficit. In this way, the idea remains that transnational police try to control the way in which they characterize their profession, telling different stories depending on who is listening. However, this again differs from the fighting fetish explanation, which, for example, is supported by the way that I as an ethnographer, like many before me (see Fassin, 2013; Loftus, 2009), rarely experience much difference between frontstage and backstage police portrayals of the fundamental need to put up a fight. As I have sought to illustrate using the empirical examples included in this article, the transnational police I encountered were not so much trying to hide the fact that their work was actually of a different and at times mundane character, or perhaps even lacking in substance. In telling their warlike tales, they rather seemed to be “on autopilot”. They themselves pointed to the differences and even deficits of transnational police work, but, nevertheless, zealously returned to telling combative stories about their work, appearing as such less as symbolic menders and more as narrative automatons—devoted more than deliberate.

This, then, spills into the probably most popular theory that transnational police self-representations are caused by specific norms and values belonging to conventional “police culture”. This article’s proposal that a fighting fetish is at the heart of the transnational police’s presentation-of-self certainly owes much to the “police culture” explanation. That many if not most policing actors see crime fighting as the ultimate token of “real police work”, including transnational police work, is a major reason for the widespread use of the warlike portrayals that I encountered when talking with multiple transnational police actors of different rank and in different locations across Europe. Whether through their
academy training or through their respective policing organizations, they had obviously been socialized into thinking about the world and their work in certain ways.

Still, therein also lies the difference between the “police culture” and “fighting fetish” explanations. Theories of police culture largely locate the genesis of policing actors’ viewpoints and dramatizations within the police organization itself. While a few studies contemplate how the culture of the police also stems from wider societal structures (see Jauregui, 2016; Loader and Mulcahy, 2003; Martin, 2019; Reiner, 2010), most police culture researchers tend to focus on how (transnational) police culture is a culture of its own—a culture and outlook produced and upheld by a backstage enculturation where old-timers teach neophytes to think and behave like “real” (transnational) cops (see Van Maanen, 1973).

Such internal police enculturation certainly occurs. However, the “fighting fetish” explanation is of a different epistemological order. First, it locates the genesis of warlike representations not just inside but, more often, outside the organization. As Reiner has argued, the contemporary fetishization of policing is of a wider societal nature. It is not only an idea held by a group of men and women employed in policing organization but also very much a governing narrative in society. This, for example, is also why Loader and Mulcahy (2003) have argued for the need to study not simply the police’s culture but “policing culture” beyond the police organization (see also Martin, 2018).

Moreover, a fetish or an obsession is not the same as a cultural norm or a value. While (police) norms and values may have become habituated in the Bourdieusian sense of the word, having become integral to our self-understanding, they nevertheless remain at least somewhat susceptible to reflection and analysis (for a police research discussion thereof see Chan, 2004). We may hold them dear; we may not give them much thought; we may promote them; or we even may fiercely defend them, but this also shows that they are not entirely beyond questioning or contemplation. A fetish largely is. This is what Marx (2019 [1867]) told us in discussing “commodity fetishism”. This is what anthropologists like Graeber (2005) have reasoned in discussing the propagative power of social fetishes. This is of course what is at the heart of Reiner’s work. Consequently, the portrayal of transnational policing as a fight cannot just be seen as an example of a symbolic communication of certain professional norms and values that the transnational police have been socialized into; it is, at least to some degree I would argue, its own form of reification by which (police)man-made matters are perceived as inherent attributes of the people involved and thus largely beyond reproach.

Concluding perspectives

We’re waging war! Transnational criminals are constantly expanding their armory with new methods and new technologies, and so are we. That’s the truth. It is. But, maybe, I don’t know, maybe it’s also the kind of war story we keep liking to tell one another . . .

This article has tried to make sense of the many martial representations communicated to me by various European transnational policing actors, of which the above is seemingly one more example. Other approaches and virtues were also described as being of importance, including information, intelligence and collaboration. Nevertheless, the warlike
most often became the dominant narrative when they were pointing to the very quintes-
sence of their occupation. Four possible explanations have been given as to why transna-
tional police self-representations tend to differ from reality. The first explained the
discrepancy as a matter of “moral entrepreneurship”, understanding it as an example of
the transnational police actively promoting their worldviews. The second explanation
examined the discrepancy as a “symbolic mending”, arguing that transnational policing
is communicated in dramatic ways to divert attention away from internal deficits and
deficiencies. A third explanation described how their warlike representations echo the
already combative values of conventional “police culture” found in many police forces
around the world.

Though adding valuable insights, these three established explanations also differ from
the fourth and last explanation discussed in the article. Here, the argument is that trans-
national police recurrently communicate in combative ways as they have a fetishized
idea about policing. This is a fetish about “the fight” being a prerequisite of all police
work, and therefore a fixation that actors of transnational policing faithfully adhere to
even when their work tells a different story. Thus, instead of arguing that transnational
police are representing their work in theatrical ways simply to push an agenda; to hide
the fact that their actual work is in fact much less dramatic/different; or to please an
organizational outlook, the argument here is, in all its banality, that transnational policing
is represented as a form of warfare as this is actually what its actors blindly believe to be
the truth. Even though their workaday lives offer much evidence to counter this narra-
tive, they stick to it much as religious believers remain unwaveringly loyal to the apos-
tle’s teachings.

Bearing this in mind, I nevertheless wish to end this article with a slight turning of the
tables, to consider the palpable hesitation to be seen in the words (above) of an officer
employed at Interpol. Though most remained resolute in their commitment to martial
representations, I did occasionally come across transnational police who wavered in their
belief. “Maybe”, it was a story they had been “tell[ing] each other?” Or, as one Frontex
officer bluntly asked me and himself:

If we don’t ultimately have this tough lingo, this way of speaking about our work and seeing
the world we live in, if our work is not set against the evils of this world, then why are we even
here?

Space does not allow me to further consider such occasional reservations expressed
by transnational police actors—or, for that matter, whether apathy is truly the only
substitute for police aggression, as this last quote seems to imply. I hope not. What I
will say is that such reservations are another reason why I believe this article’s per-
spectives are of worth. Disclosing the fighting fetishes of transnational policing not
only provides food for thought for people external to, and already critical of, contem-
porary (transnational) policing efforts (see Ellison and Pino, 2012; Fleetwood and Lea,
2020; Goldsmith and Sheptycki, 2007). It can also bring some oxygen to the embers of
change that may already be glowing among transnational policing actors. To stay with
the dramaturgy of this article, it may inspire transformation not only outside but inside
the apparatus, allowing its actors not always to follow guilelessly but, someday, to
fight off their fetish.
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Notes
1. Eurojust = The European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation. Frontex = The European Border and Coast Guard Agency. MAOC-N = Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre—Narcotics. EMCDDA = The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. UNODC = The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
2. TREV (Terrorisme, Radicalisme, Extrémisme et Violence Internationale) was an intergovernmental network of national officials from ministries of justice and the interior outside the European Community framework.
3. One should note that more recent anthropological studies of policing, often conducted outside the western context, have produced different accounts of policing and of “police culture” (see Jauregui, 2016; Martin, 2019).

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