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The rubber brick's story: A cultural sociology of policing protest in Europe

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ABSTRACT
This ethnographically based article investigates the simulated enactments European police forces undergo in mock cities in order to train for protest policing. From a perspective grounded in cultural sociology, the analysis focuses on the rubber brick used in these simulations as a substitute for the stones that protesters sometimes hurl at police. It looks at the brick as a cultural materialisation that marks a specific form of police training, as well as policing more generally. By following the stone's trace, the article argues that the brick acts as a medium that reflects police action: It derives its meaning from the imaginary of the demonstrators and protesters as violent, and sometimes even as hostile, in the sense of forces which should be met with a combative police reaction. Thus, the stone creates a self-image of the police characterised by toughness, courage, and strength. The thorough article adds to the research about protest policing by offering the first investigation of the meaning of simulated training for police forces.

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At the end of my stay, D. André, a trainer, approaches me. He presents me with a stone and tells me, more or less,

> I'm giving you this stone, but don't tell anyone. I want you to have it so that it will remind you of your time in our training centre. Many officers who train here in Saint-Astier simply take a stone home with them. This is why we often have shortages. The stones are very popular. Actually, it is forbidden to take them because we have to reorder them all the time.

Today, that stone sits in my living room. It found its way there by chance, now located in a spot which would normally house a vase, family photos or perhaps some small object d'art. It serves as a type of souvenir. While

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using it as a research subject, I sometimes moved it around. I took it with me to the office, or kept it on my desk. At times, it might have rested on the glass table in my living room, on my chest of drawers, or on a bookshelf.

It is a black cube about the size of a hand as shown in Picture 1. Because it is made of rubber – the same material that many playground surfaces are made of today – it is not nearly as heavy as a real stone. As I write this, I remember how one hit me on the helmet, just above my eye, while I was observing a training session. It didn't hurt too badly, but it wasn't pleasant either.

In this article, I tell the story of this rubber brick, using the largest police training centre in Europe, the *Centre national d'entraînement des forces de gendarmerie* (CNEFG) in Saint-Astier in the French Dordogne, where the gendarmerie trains officers in how to police protests, as a case study. From a perspective grounded in cultural sociology – and more precisely, symbol, and simulation theory (cf. Baudrillard, 1983) – I argue that because the stone is a meaningful cultural materialisation (cf. Scarpaci, 2016), it marks a specific act of policing. That is, it is a symbol and can be examined as such. It is a symbol for the training of protest policing in France. But in terms of its relationship to other training centres (in the UK, Northern Ireland, and Germany) and their material practices (including their use of Molotov cocktails and other stones that are specific to various national contexts), it can also be understood – in terms of its status as an 'enemy'

Picture 1. The rubber brick from the *Centre national d'entraînement des forces de gendarmerie* in France.

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weapon – as an object that symbolizes the training of protest policing in all of Europe. By following the stone's trace, then, we can identify the cultural codes that structure police action. The stone, as I argue, is a medium that displays – in materialised form – the meaning of this training. By studying it, we can analyze the training of protest policing in Europe more broadly.

This study is important because the brick condenses the way police forces socially construct protest and the policing of protest. Police forces give the brick a meaning that is likely to impact real policing situations. Using the sociology of material culture as a lens (cf. Hicks & Beaudry, 2010), this paper thus contributes to ongoing research concerning the training of protest police but also wider research regarding protest policing itself.

I conclude that the stone's relevance, or its iconic status (Hebel & Wagner, 2011), is derived from the imaginary of demonstrators and insurgents as a violent force – and sometimes even an enemy force – that must be met by a combative police reaction. The stone thus creates a self-image of the police characterised by toughness, courage, and strength. In the words of Clifford Geertz, the stone's popularity can be understood as a 'meta-commentary,' a 'story that a group tells itself about itself' (Geertz, 1973, p. 448). It stands for what is understood to be legitimate or unlawful protest but also for what constitutes legitimate or unlawful police action. As a medium that reflects police action, it also serves as a handy condensed object that symbolizes the role and self-image of the police.

What kinds of training makes use of these stones? Which police forces and training centres does this study address? Why are rubber paving stones used during training in the first place? I will answer all of these questions shortly. First, I must discuss my research object and my sociological method. Then, I will follow the trace of the stone in a circular motion, looking at the different components of police training. In the second and third sections, I outline the different scenic parts actors assume during their training. In the fourth part, I look into the simulated police response the stone elicits. In a fifth part, I analyze the stone as a more generalized symbol of police protest training throughout Europe. Then, in the final section, which frames the analysis within the context of social constructivism and the sociology of simulation, I discuss the various ways these training practices are likely to shape reality.

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The object of research: Trainings for protest policing

What is this study's research object? I am concerned with those centres in Europe that are designed to train officers in the policing of public order. At these centres, police forces – just like the military (Graham, 2011; Kretschmann, 2016) – simulate public order situations in mock cities, focusing primarily on the policing of protest. Their aim is to train people to anticipate the types of challenges that might occur during situations involving protest demonstrations.

These sites have all the outward characteristics of a city, though no one actually lives in them. There are community centres, petrol stations, shops, and public spaces. Sometimes, specific parts of a city are demarcated, such as an inner city or a government district. In various enactments, they can be designed to reflect different realities: a terrorist attack, an uprising, a demonstration. Police forces try to develop scenarios that are as close to reality as possible, implementing them through the extensive use of materials and personnel. Some trainers act as demonstrators or journalists. Others stand in as police officers. Sometimes, hundreds of police officers are used to simulate large-scale protests or riots. Usually, these scenarios are characterised by serious rioting: stones, bottles, or Molotov cocktails are hurled, cars are set on fire, barricades are built (Kretschmann, 2021).

The socio-history of these mock cities for police training has not yet been written. At this point, it suffices to say that today, the number of them is increasing worldwide, including throughout Europe. As far as we know (often, these training centres are hidden from the public), the oldest and largest 'city' like this in Europe is the CNEFG, which has been run by the French gendarmerie since the end of the 1960s (Bruneteaux, 1996). However, such training cities also exist in England, Northern Ireland, and other countries. Police 'traumas' that resulted from failed police operations (Goreau-Ponceaud & Ponceaud-Goreau, 2014, pp. 2–3), combined with increasing legitimacy crises among police forces, were decisive factors that led to the development of this type of training infrastructure. At the end of the 1960s, police forces in Germany and France were confronted for the first time with large protest movements, and in the 1980s, police in the UK faced continuing unrest. Their police response was often criticised as being brutal and disproportionate. Against the backdrop of an expanded understanding of democracy (in France and Germany), and increasing social tensions between immigrant populations and structurally racist police forces (in England), this

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criticism has ushered in a period of reflection and experimentation involving alternative approaches to protest policing (for France, see Berlière & Lévy, 2011, p. 242).

Aiming for quality assurance, standardisation, and the continuing development of policing protest methods, basic and specialised training courses are held in these mock cities. Basic training is the biggest activity that takes place there, though that varies from country to country based on the different organisational contexts of individual police forces. For example, basic training might take one day for police in Northern Ireland, two days for police in London, and 15 days for the French gendarmerie. In England and Northern Ireland, unlike the French gendarmerie and the German police, there are no training units for riot police, except from the Territorial Support Groups, which I did not include in my empirical sample (cf., in general, della Porta et al., 2006). German police, on the other hand, do not have a standardised training like other countries, and they do not use a mock city (though they occasionally use sites that belong to the military), which, as I explain below, affects the nature of their protest policing. So, to say the brick is symbolic of all trainings is only partially accurate. German police often train on the sites of police barracks, where they convert streets and buildings into training grounds. They do not provide basic training but rather training for specialised tasks in public order policing (i.e. the group leadership of a police unit; the course lasts six weeks (Kretschmann, 2022)).[1]

This article is based on an ethnography of basic trainings in mock cities, and the group leader training in Germany, that I conducted between 2015 and 2020. It focuses on training in England, France, Germany, and Northern Ireland. In England, I carried out empirical research at the Metropolitan Police Service Specialist Training Centre (MPSTC) for the Metropolitan Police, the British Transport Police, and the London City Police. In Northern Ireland, I studied the training of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in their training centre. In France, I examined the training at the CNEFG. In Germany, I observed the training of the Police of Lower Saxony.

Because the police forces of individual states are distinct from one another, this broad selection allows me to present this phenomenon in its full range. These four countries represent specific traditions of protest policing in Europe. Based on their different understandings of the state, their different police and citizen-police-relationships (Knöbl, 1998), their organisational structures (McCarthy et al., 1999), their police cultures (della Porta & Reiter, 1998, p. 2; Wood, 2014), and their

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general developments in criminal policy (Joyce & Wain, 2014, p. 274), they police protest differently.[2] I selected these particular training centres for their distinct positions (Kretschmann, 2021).

Since no comprehensive investigation of this phenomenon has been carried out yet (cf. Goreau-Ponceaud & Ponceaud-Goreau, 2014; Kalalahti, 2015/16), my research is primarily limited to looking at the *common* characteristics of police training. For this purpose, and in accordance with the ethnographic ideal of carrying out different methods (e.g. DeVault et al., 2012), I collected data through observations, interviews, internal police documents, and other documents officers referred me to because they either used them in their own work or considered them to be valuable. In total, I conducted more than 50 interviews, and I carried out observations for over 8 weeks.

The brick as a symbol for violent conflicts

The stone is omnipresent in the French gendarmerie's mock city in Saint-Astier in the south of France. One comes across it almost every time one visits. The bricks are part of this unreal, ghostly, inanimate training backdrop, which is reminiscent of a film set or a deserted town in the Old West. It is precisely at this point that its symbolic qualities – *qua* socially signified materiality – come into play.

Before I analyze the stone further, I should briefly describe the mock city of Saint-Astier. There are four different training grounds. The largest one, which is the one used most often, is the Pôle 1 ['Nucleus 1']. Its centre consists of two parallel streets connected by crossroads and a square, and it is designed to represent mixed residential and public urban areas. On one of the two streets, there are administrative facilities and municipal buildings (i.e. a town hall and a cultural centre). This is made clear by the inscriptions 'Mairie' ['Town Hall'] and 'Centre culturel' ['Cultural Centre'], and the buildings' opening hours on the two adjacent buildings. In the longer street that runs parallel to the first one, colorful inscriptions help represent various shop fronts. Further away from this street, in a second 'inner city area,' there is a pedestrian area about 30 meters long: its beginning and end are marked by plastic banners that demarcate the 'Zone piétonne' ['pedestrian area']. This area is not lined by houses but by a concrete wall that borders the street. The pedestrian area is adjacent to a large, undeveloped square-like area, with roads leading into it from all sides. Further away (on the outskirts of the city, so to speak), there is a discotheque, which is not

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marked by its own building but only by an inscription on a wall. At a distance, there is a warehouse space that is sometimes used to simulate a railway station or a factory.

The stones are everywhere here. There are large numbers of them in the streets, which makes the area resemble a battlefield. A 'street cleaning' occurs every evening, where workers collect the stones and remove traces of the demonstration or uprising. Burnt or wrecked cars are put back in their parking facility, and car tires, thick branches, and other objects that have been used to build barricades are put aside or stored in their designated place. In short, every night, the city gets cleaned up and put back in order.

Yet the traces of past conflicts are still evident. Hence, like a crime scene, I argue in this section that the mock city perpetually evokes violent acts. This is the stones' first symbolic effect. Even though the mock city has other idyllic features, its violent atmosphere still pervades. For example, beyond the streets and on the city outskirts, there is mixed woodland. And since the mock city is situated on a hill – like a medieval fortress towering above the picturesque town of Saint-Astier and its 5,000 inhabitants – the views stretch far over the Dordogne's rolling landscape. The mock city violently breaks this peaceful scene again and again. One can see the shopping carts demonstrators and rebels use to transport their stones and other weapons, upon which officers hang their red and white striped helmets during breaks, in Picture 2). There is also damage to the

Picture 2. Abandoned shopping cart at the side of a street in which the demonstrators transport the stones in the *Centre national d'entraînement des forces de gendarmerie*.

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buildings and burn marks on the streets, stains which no cleaning service can remove.

Stones are also frequently found in places other than the streets. When one enters the buildings, for example, there are sometimes stones lying around inside, which have flown through the glassless windows during the confrontations. It is not uncommon to see the trainers returning these scattered stones to the street so that the cleaners can find them in the evening. When I accompanied a trainer into the prison building – where a briefing for the simulation was scheduled to take place – he used his spare time before the units arrived to throw stones back out onto the street through the window. Another trainer collected them from the backyard of a building complex as we were watching a protest march.

The stone as a symbol of liberal left-wing to radical left-wing protest

The stone is ubiquitous in these training simulations. Not a single simulation takes place that does not include some type of violence by the demonstrators. Protesters provoke police officers, build and defend barricades, set cars on fire, as well as throwing Molotov cocktails. While these 'means of intervention' can vary, every demonstration or uprising simulated at the CNEFG includes the throwing of stones. The stones, therefore, are the central artifact of the simulations, a symbol not only of violent protest but, from a police point of view, of protest in general.

This is easily illustrated by the demonstrations themselves. These simulations are structured in such a way that a protest begins as a gathering of people and then gradually escalates. At the start, demonstrators might chat with the officers, or those who are responsible for the demonstration might come to an understanding with the police. At this point, the demonstrators will still follow police instructions while they stage a peaceful march through the city, for example. At some point, the police stop the demonstrators (e.g. at a roadblock). The protesters then quickly provoke the police. While a delegation of protestors negotiates with the 'préfet of the police', the situation in the demonstration's front rows heats up. Police and demonstrators face off against each other, arguments quickly turn into insults. The demonstrators do not want to follow police instructions – for example, they want to take a route that the police have prohibited. This leads to scuffles or attempts to break through the police cordon. At some point, stones are thrown.

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Other violent acts might occur as well. In a trade union protest, for example, demonstrators might kidnap a factory boss. When demonstrations simulate French overseas territories, the demonstrators might also use firearms.

To put it more abstractly, these simulations are designed in such a way that each demonstration leads to the worst-case scenario. At the CNEFG, the dramatisation's peaceful elements make up only a small part of the simulation. The violent scenes play the preeminent role. In the case of demonstrations, the situation continuously escalates from an initially peaceful protest to a confrontation. In the case of a riot simulation, the violence can begin more rapidly or even immediately, with escalation levels that are reminiscent of a civil war. Since every demonstration simulation involves the violent use of the brick, it thus serves as a symbol for *any* type of protest.

My argument in this section is that in these training simulations, 'protest' first and foremost means left-wing protest. While the police officers told me that they simulate all kinds of protests and riots, a systematic analysis of the observed trainings, documents, and interview transcripts shows that protests from the political Left (from the liberal left wing to left-wing extremist protests) are represented almost exclusively. When simulations do involve protests from the political Right – and when they do, it is always the extreme right wing – they never take place without a counter demonstration that involves left-wing or liberal currents.

This representation is plausible to a degree. Large-scale protests, as they are staged in the simulations, almost always originate on the left and liberal left in the countries under consideration (for Germany, see Rucht & Teune, 2011). But the political designations do not always match the protest forms that are chosen for specific simulations. In terms of the protest forms used, they prioritise practices that can be attributed to radical and antagonistic spectrums (cf. Fernandez, 2008, p. 8). This is true even in the case of liberal left-wing demonstrations like trade union protests. However, the way the simulations depict protests coincides with findings from social movement and criminology research that states (1) the police imagine protest primarily as a left-wing phenomenon, and (2) they equate left and left-liberal demonstrators with radical or antagonistic actors (Winter, 1998, p. 328).

The fact that violent left-wing protests are generally the focus of the trainings is also demonstrated by the fact that the black bloc (cf. Juris, 2005) is almost as ubiquitous in the trainings as the bricks.

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Demonstrators and insurgents show up to simulations dressed predominantly in black clothing that they bring from home. According to Jerome Skolnick (1994, p. 41), the police routinely orient themselves around certain signs, including the way someone is dressed, that indicate that a person could be dangerous. When wearing black clothing, the protesters take on characteristics which, from the police's point of view, indicate danger; they mark themselves as 'symbolic assailants' (Skolnick, 1994, p. 41). Because of the black bloc's special tactics and potential for violence, the police consider it to be the most challenging – and therefore the most dangerous – type of protest practice. In France, my conversations and interviews with the officers clearly demonstrated that they assumed 'members' of the black bloc wanted to kill police officers. At the same time, this refers to an actor who represents a (traditional) enemy for the police (Winter, 1998, pp. 204–205; Ullrich, 2020, p. 15). Accordingly, the designation of the 'police counterpart,' the protestors, is 'adversaire' ['opponent'] (Goreau-Ponceaud & Ponceaud-Goreau, 2014; Kretschmann, 2021). Therefore, we can conclude that the stone symbolises protests that are primarily left-wing. Even if more pluralistic formations are displayed at the beginning of a simulation, the training session always ends up becoming violent and organised as a black bloc that is hostile to the police.

Thus, it is clear that the CNEFG's simulations neither train officers for average police operations nor simulate a representative sample of the entire spectrum of possible types of police deployments. Rather, the training focuses on police operations that represent only a small part of everyday police work.

Police practice: The stone as a trigger

Against this backdrop, simulations become more than simply a tool for training police officers. Rather, the simulations are endowed with a specific 'aura,' a meaning that is attached to their entire form. In this way, the stone casts its symbolic shadow as an artifact. Walter Benjamin defines an aura as an 'ornamental surrounding in which the thing or being lies firmly embedded like in a padded case' (Benjamin, 2006, p. 58; see a similar idea for the policing of 'atmospheres' in Wall, 2019, 2020). Benjamin argues that it has the ability to seize those who deal with it. Trainers in England sometimes describe this exact experience. They say that the simulations have a very specific meaning which participants anticipate. This means that the police officers fall into certain

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routine patterns of action, which are different from real police operations. More specifically, the mock city almost prescribes an escalatory and harsh method of policing (and as officers' statements implicitly suggest, this happens in a way) sensual, affective (cf. Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman, 2016). Clearly, something similar takes place at the CNEFG.

In practice, this means that the most prominent tactics that emerge during the simulations are those belonging to the operational philosophy of 'strategic incapacitation' (Noakes & Gillham, 2006). According to current developments in criminal policy, this approach can be situated in the form of a 'new penology' (Feeley & Simon, 1992), which resides somewhere between the mere repression of protest ('escalated force'; McPhail et al., 1998) and a dialogue-based approach ('negotiated management'; della Porta & Reiter, 1998).[3] By classifying demonstrations into various risk categories, it presupposes – in ways that are strikingly similar to colonial policing (cf. Jobard & Lévy, 2017) – an *unpacifiable* event space. It includes a range of tactics that prevent or severely restrict protests and, above all, make transgressive protest *de facto* more difficult. For example, this approach defines some spaces as exempt from protests, involves the increased use of nonlethal weapons, and strategically uses detention, surveillance, and the infiltration of civil society. It involves 'isolating or neutralizing the sources of potential disruption' and, among other things, 'the extensive control of space in order to isolate and contain disruptive protesters actual or potential' (Gillham, 2011, p. 1).

The stone thus also symbolises the assumed necessity of a harsh policing approach. In this respect, it reflects the aura of the training centre itself. If the demonstrators use violence, it is only logical that the police must stop it based on their legal mandate to do so. An essential factor in this dynamic, which often subjectively seems to be more important than the legal mandate, is the element of self-protection – that is, as soon as the demonstrators use violence, police officers are in danger, and, therefore, they have to take action. In a figurative sense, the stone initiates police action. It is the reason why the police have to use coercive force. The stone's pervasiveness in these training sessions – and the guaranteed violent appearance of the demonstrators – thus affectively binds the officers to the mock city as a site of tough policing.

At the same time, police officers appreciate training for worst-case scenarios because they assume it will prepare them for every possible challenge that may arise in policing protests. Training for 'best-case' scenarios is assumed to be less relevant. De-escalation tactics and communicative tasks are considered to be 'situations faciles' ['easy

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situations'], which hardly require any practice. However, what is not accounted for is the fact that communication from riot units, which is characteristic of public order policing, has a physical specificity. Trainers told me that for many police officers, communication skills disappear – sometimes completely – as soon as they don their protective equipment. It is true that today in France, the police refrain from simulating scenarios where there is serious rioting from the start. In recent years, the scripts have also included initial scenes that evoke communicative action. Likewise, the training has developed new elements that state that once a protest has escalated, it should not simply be policed in a heavy-handed way from that point forward but that tactics should instead evolve if the dynamic deescalates. In those cases, the trainees can reduce the situation's 'haute intensité' ['high intensity'], as the French police call it. The simulations' general rationale nevertheless largely falls under the rubric of, as the proverbial motto of the French gendarmerie states, 'entraînement dur, guerre facile' ['hard training, easy war']. In other words, less focus is placed on training to avoid escalations from the start than on how to pacify events that are more reminiscent of riots or civil wars than actual protests.

The stone therefore symbolises an unambiguous situation as well. Since the simulations always involve a massive use of force by an opposing or even hostile opponent, they are free of ambiguity, provided that the simulation draws a distinct line between the police and the protesters. Such a scenario rids itself of ambivalent attributions and conflict progressions because it simplifies the protest, framing both the protest and the police response as a binary. Situations in which it is not entirely clear whether a law has been violated – or situations where officers have to decide if responding to minor offenses (or even some major ones) would only escalate the situation further – play only a limited role in the simulations or are not present at all. Additionally, in a simulation centering on the stone, the police can only understand themselves as a reactive party, a force that has solely been called into action by the demonstrators and insurgents. This type of scenario excludes mutual provocations, which are not unusual in real operations, and instances of police misconduct, which occur even in the simulations (cf. in general Earl et al., 2003).

The evoked police response – the use of coercive force – therefore tends to be experienced as something that cannot be disputed and is beyond doubt. Moreover, since the entire crowd always acts in a violent manner, difficult questions concerning escalation and

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proportional police action – such as the ambiguities that may arise in operations involving mixed protest groups – are not addressed. Thus, by continually framing left-wing demonstrators or insurgents as criminals, the police officers then appear as 'normal citizens' (Behr, 2006, p. 60, translation by A.K.).

The enemies' weapons: The stone as a symbol for training centres throughout Europe

There are pitfalls to narrowly analyzing these training simulations through one symbolic object like the stone. Most readily, it risks treating a complex phenomenon in an undifferentiated way. It is therefore imperative to discuss why – despite the obvious differences between different countries (and for a full examination of these, see Kretschmann, 2021, 2022) – the stone serves as a material symbol for police trainings in all of Europe. However, we must make another differentiation at this point – the exception that proves every rule – and it involves the case of the Lower Saxony Police in Germany.

But let's start with the similarities that exist across the different countries under consideration. Like France, in Northern Ireland and England, mock cities also appear as scenes of violent confrontation. There too, scorch marks on the ground and damage to the buildings indicate previous violent conflicts. But the stones – which are wooden bricks in England and old rubber bullet cartridges in Northern Ireland – are kept more tidily than they are in Saint-Astier. They are collected more thoroughly in the training centres, which also tend to be smaller and neater overall. Likewise, in England and Northern Ireland, there are no glassless windows through which the stones can fly. In England, plexiglas is built into the windows, and in Northern Ireland, the windows are only painted on the buildings.

In these two countries, the Molotov cocktail serves as another equivalent to the stone, a symbol that replaces its role in the training sessions. Although stone throwing is a part of every simulation, in both Northern Ireland and England, the simulations always involve the throwing of Molotov cocktails. In England, I was told upon request, the most recent instance of Molotov cocktails being used during an actual protest was when two of them were deployed in 2011 during riots in London. Despite this fact, about 40 Molotov cocktails (Picture 3)are used in each simulation. All the participants and trainers talk about them. They are the subject of both the participants' fear and excitement,

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and they are the highlight of the training. In this training, it is not so much the stone as it is the Molotov cocktail that is a source of attraction and attention. One trainer told me that even though he had been working at the centre for 20 years, he was still fascinated by the training sessions. He opened his mobile phone and showed me some of the photographs of the trainings that he took almost daily. They showed the bright blue sky with the orange flames of Molotov cocktails flashing against it; rain in semidarkness, falling on shards of broken Molotov cocktail bottles; or a mixture of clouds and sun – typical for the south of England – with policemen sprinting through the burning streets' muggy atmosphere, holding their shields (and if one tries on the protective gear, as I have, it quickly becomes clear how hot and sweaty it can become).

The scenarios across different countries also have their similarities. Both Ireland and England play out worst-case scenarios with their simulations. There, every protest resembles a civil war. Equally, it is primarily liberal left-wing to radical left-wing protests that are simulated. Correspondingly, the crowd requires a heavy-handed police response, and dialogue-based approaches are only present to a limited extent. At the beginning of the simulations, communicating one's actions to the demonstrators or otherwise seeking contact with them is valued. Although in these more peaceful moments, the officers are not communicating as much as they are often simply facing the demonstrators silently. These attempts to police peaceful situations or deescalate must

Picture 3. Molotov cocktails at the training centre of the Police Service of Northern Ireland awaiting their near end.

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consistently seem like failures since they are always followed by violence on the part of the demonstrators. As it is in France, the police only react. The simulations are designed in such a way that the police are readily waiting for something unlawful to happen so they have to intervene. In England and Northern Ireland as well, given that the police face a consistently delinquent crowd, the simulation allows for a mode of action that is free of ambivalence.

But there are also important differences. In England and Northern Ireland, police avoid demonstrations of their power to a greater extent than they do in France. This is something that the training simulations in England focus on in particular. There, the units only use their protective kit when a protest situation grows more acute. In cases like these, the police practice leaving the scene to put on the protective equipment that has been stored several streets away (this is an exercise that also requires practice because the kit is difficult to put on). Only then do they return to the scene of the incident.

Against this background, the stone – and the Molotov cocktail, which fulfills a similar function – can be understood in a generalized way as the enemy's weapon. Likewise, it stands at the core of the training, representing a hostile opponent who must be met with appropriate toughness and force. Through the stone, the centre establishes its specific aura of tough policing (as can be seen in Picture 4).

Picture 4. Mock stones at the training centre of the Police Service of Northern Ireland at the end of a training session.

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The police force of Lower Saxony – even though they also focus primarily on left-liberal and radical left-wing protests – function as an exceptional case in my sample. It is not clear whether this is due to their particular training conditions or their underlying philosophy; we can assume both elements influence one another. As I have mentioned previously, the police force of Lower Saxony does not have mock cities. Rather, they practice in the streets of a training centre that was originally designed to be used for classroom education. Because it does not have an area that allows participants to damage buildings – exercises are held in spaces that are used as offices, accommodations, classrooms, etc. – high levels of escalation can only be practiced to a limited extent. In these locations, no conflict is spatially visible at all. In simulations involving small groups of police, a greater emphasis is placed on policing along dialogical lines. Tennis balls – harmless artifacts in comparison to the projectiles used in other countries, objects designed for leisure activities – simulate bricks. Sometimes, though it happens rarely, this training centre even simulates situations that do not require any police intervention at all. In general, however, it is not at all certain that stones will fly in a simulation, and in the small group exercises, it is indeed the exception to the rule (Kretschmann, 2021).

Larger simulations involving the Lower Saxony police force are much more infrequent. The majority of them take place on municipal military training grounds, and they tend to be similar to trainings in other countries. Here, protesters set cars on fire and throw small, semi-filled plastic water bottles at police. These exercises are much more reminiscent of a worst-case scenario than the small group exercises are, although they still do not quite reach the intensity of the simulations in other countries. The Lower Saxony trainings also involve more lower-threshold situations and, correspondingly, more communicative tasks. For example, using 40 Molotov cocktails, as England does in its simulations, would be considered excessive by police in Lower Saxony.

The paving stone as a trophy

Badges, symbols, medals, and other objects play an important role for police forces. In a Maussian sense (Mauss, 1923/24), they function as awards for specific actions or as gifts that create social bonds. No police office is complete without a showcase containing such objects, and when different police forces meet one another, they regularly give these kinds of objects as gifts. At the end of my visit, the head of the

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CNEFG handed me a badge with my name and the period of my stay engraved on the back. During my first visit to the training centre two years earlier, I observed how a researcher from Toulouse – who had, in cooperation with the police, conducted research into police officers' psychological stress – got a photograph of the CNEFG signed by the head of the centre.

However, beyond these official devotional objects, there is another level of unofficial symbolism, and this is where the brick comes into play. As a symbol, it supports the official devotional objects' meaning and sometimes even seems to outdo it. In Northern Ireland, I received an unofficial present in the form of a rubber bullet cartridge (which serves as a type of brick in that country). Additionally, I was given a fire resistant balaclava, which police wear under their helmets as protection against Molotov cocktails and, in many countries *de facto*, to mask the officers' identities. This latter gift is particularly significant since police officers in Northern Ireland live like undercover agents (Kretschmann, 2021).

Hence, it is significant that these unofficial symbols are not represented by the weapons of the police (think, for example, of the grenades in France) but by the weapons of the demonstrators (though this only applies to a limited extent in Northern Ireland, where the police's weapons are also the enemy's weapons). The stone or the Molotov cocktail, those objects that pose a danger to police and that are associated with their training – partly as objects of fear, partly as objects of the training's challenge – are unofficially at the heart of the simulations. At this point, we can read the stone's popularity among the participants and trainers as an act of appropriation. When officers take a stone home with them, we can understand that action as a self-defined award for passing the training mission. Sometimes they go into the training with nervousness, sometimes with fear, but this training always carries a sense of tension due to its demanding quality and the fact that it is often used as a form of evaluation or test for officers in training.

More precisely, the stone is a trophy. It speaks of conflict and confrontation and – at the moment when an officer pockets a stone – of a victorious battle that comes with a prize. The urban space has been reconquered, the territorial claim has been restored, and the opponent has been defeated. Just like the training sessions themselves, which are designed to give the police the upper hand as much as possible (in order to prepare them for real missions), pocketing the stone testifies to the act of claiming the opponent's weapon and thus the opponent

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himself. Yet it is precisely the courage, masculinity, and strength that are embedded in the stone from the demonstrators' side that makes it so significant in the mirrored image of a counter-projection. This symbolic transfer, or this appropriation of meaning, is sustained, which becomes clear when we look at how the stone is used after the simulation. As soon as the stone ends up in an officer's living room or on a mantlepiece, it is transformed from an object with utility value into an object that exclusively has an exhibition value, to put it in the words of museum theory (Hein, 2000, p. 55). At that point, the stone no longer exists to be thrown. It becomes a visual object that invites the telling of heroic stories. It can be assumed that the semantics of danger remain attached to it, though they are simultaneously contained by it.

It thus becomes clear that the rubber brick, in its quality as a medium, enables identification for the police officers. By policing demonstrations and riots in the training sessions, they define and secure not only their actions but also themselves. Earlier, I stated that the stone could be understood as a 'meta-commentary,' a 'story that a group tells itself about itself' (Geertz, 1973, p. 448). If one focuses on the emotions associated with this training – for the most part, officers feel the simulations are real policing scenarios, and they feel they can pose a danger to their group if they perform badly – then the stone symbolizes the courage police officers attribute to themselves when they expose themselves to the dangers of policing protest. From my interviews with participants, it is clear that the training sessions produce stories involving risks, challenges, and dangers that have all been overcome. The fact that it is not a real stone but one that has already been defused (because it is made of rubber) does not lessen its ultimate effect.[4]

Obviously, this finding is connected with other realms of police practice. The extensive literature on the English bobby, for example, provides impressive evidence concerning how self-image and professional practice are interdependent (Emsley, 2010). Of course, we must remember that the self-image of units dedicated to public order policing differs considerably from those of patrolling or office staff. The literature shows that riot police officers often think of themselves as 'better than others' (Behr, 2006, p. 56, translation by A.K.); in contrast to their colleagues, they are doing the 'real' police work. In line with a traditional idea of masculinity that is associated with the 'subordination of women, heterosexism, uncontrollable sexuality, authority, control, competitive individualism, independence, aggressiveness and capacity for violence' (Conti, 2010,

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p. 10), public order policing officers more readily attribute to themselves qualities such as strength, toughness, and the willingness to take risks (Behr, 2006). Some researchers have argued they have a higher commitment to their job, going so far as to use the term ‘sacrifice’ to describe the work they do (Hatházy, 2003, p. 67).

One could argue that the stone is the actual emblem of the training centre in this regard. It is the combative counterpart of a protester who is portrayed as a hostile opposition force. This is the condition of possibility for the stone’s popularity. The official symbols do not seem to be sufficient at this point because they are ‘only’ official: they speak of duty, but they do not speak as readily to courage, masculinity, or surviving danger. Additionally, the bricks materialise an acquired embodied knowledge – that is, they have a quality of experience. Medals and other devotional objects, on the other hand, merely represent social roles. They are more abstract and do not refer directly back to the training scenario’s concrete experience. This has an interesting parallel with soldiers who, in addition to their medals, bring grenade shells and other objects back from war.

Conclusion: Symbolism, simulation, and reality

In an intrinsically cultural sociological way, the sociological-criminological literature about police emphasizes the way police forces – along with other institutional and organisational factors – form their justification for action by constructing their subject-matter (Fassin, 2013). The problems police should address and the way those problems should be dealt with suggests the modalities of such action (Kretschmann, 2017). Because police hold a monopoly over the state’s use of force, they also hold considerable power over defining situations (Brusten, 1971), which in turn allows them to maintain their own coherent view of them (Kretschmann, 2022).

In policing protest, the way police forces frame protesters is – in addition to their distinct organisation and the nature of their recruitment – the reason behind the public order policies and deployment philosophies that are applied; the techniques, tactics, and equipment that are used (cf. McCarthy et al., 1999, p. 73); and the kinds of self-images that sustain these practices as a whole. Similarly, the way protesters are envisaged determines which ideas (in light of notions of democratic participation, but also of securing state power) set the limits for when protests can take place.

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Training exercises in these mock cities belong to this pattern of constituting social reality, and this is where my analysis takes up the cultural sociological perspective. What is particular about the simulations in the mock cities is that the police forces' practices and self-perceptions do not, as is usually the case, simply arise from their interpretation of 'social facts' (Durkheim). Rather, they arise from situations that are entirely self-created through an intensive process involving the construction of meaning. The spatial and material staging, the scenarios, and the practices of the police officers who take on the role of demonstrators merge into sensual representations of sociality, which demand the police assume specific forms and self-images of policing protest. From a symbol-theoretical perspective, and from the perspective of material cultures, my analysis has shown that the police – who start with a focus on worst-case scenarios and invert the paving stone's symbolism in the 1968 French slogan, 'Sous les pavés, la plage!' ['Under the paving stones, the beach!'] (Tschou, 1968, p. 30) – are dominated by a repressive, confrontational, and rigid approach to protest. Their actions largely centre on suppressing illegitimate and delinquent crowds, whose symbolic representation culminates in the rubber brick (and which in some countries is overlaid with the even more dangerous Molotov cocktail). Thus, police training practices have less to do with policing citizens who are exercising their civil rights and more to do with the suppression of delinquent opponents or enemies. This is what the stone symbolizes.

This research result is particularly significant when we consider that these police training scenarios are likely to have real-world effects. At this point, I refer back to the perspective of the sociology of simulation I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Jean Baudrillard has pointed out that through simulations, reality and simulated reality become indistinguishable. With his concept of the simulacrum – which in Latin refers to a representation, a vision, or a mirage – that subsequently takes on meaning as an imitation – that is, a duplication or imagination of the real – Baudrillard suggests reality in late modernity is simulatively doubled in its abundance of imitations. At the same time, it disappears in order to reappear as 'hyper-reality.' Simulation, then, is not the opposite of reality, since, as Baudrillard notes, 'it is no longer about imitation, doubling or parody. It is about the substitution of the real by signs of the real' (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 11). Baudrillard thus demonstrates how the simulative rewrites the real with a dialectical flip. In the medium of simulation, the real is conceived, anticipated, and persuasively prepared (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 12).

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With this in mind, I argue that police simulations condense the real and (re)configure it in feedback loops so that the simulated fleshes out what appears desirable in terms of real order.

The policing of protest is produced through this interplay, both in terms of how politics is publicly performed as well as in terms of the ways in which relationships are managed between police and citizens. Police simulations are as much an effect of a simulation of the real as its condensation. As such, they suspend the real by simultaneously invalidating, preserving, and developing it further. Since policing protest 'is irreducibly political' (Waddington, 1996, p. 129), this means that the trainings – as one factor among others – may shape protest. By focusing on such contingencies, policing protest thus creates worlds in which protest is always civil war and the demonstrators are always the 'Other' of order.

I argue that this approach to policing protest is ambivalent at best and highly problematic at worst. Of course, these forms of training prepare police for tense public order situations (e.g. the yellow vest protests in France, which often turned violent). This has clear advantages. Trained police officers often act more calmly in critical situations than untrained officers do (Behr, 2006, p. 66). However, because this type of training portrays protest and the policing of protest as a violent activity, it minimizes the focus on communicative, deescalating approaches to policing protest (Kretschmann, 2021). It suppress democratic processes while seeking to maintain the *status quo*. Thus, the police contribute – albeit in a contemporary and innovative way – to shaping society culturally according to a politically conservative pattern.

Notes

1. However, since the group leaders are responsible for the decentralized, weekly unit-internal training, their training is also relevant to the latter training sessions.
2. Generally, previous research describes police forces in continental Europe as more centralized, authoritarian, and militarily organised than those in common law systems (e.g. Mawby, 2008, p. 18). However, within the context of protest policing, this is not entirely accurate. France and England can still be contrasted in this way, but because of Germany's federal structure, it is inaccurate to ascribe a centralized or primarily military character to its protest policing. Northern Ireland's military orientation is also at odds with this classification. The French police, with their centralized structure and their strategies and weapons, is much more at the military end of the

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continuum with regard to protest policing than many other police forces in Europe (cf. Descoulx et al., 2015). England, however, takes a more civilian approach based on its British model of policing, which states that police officers do not stand in opposition to the citizens but rather police them according to an implicit consensus as 'm[e]n in the middle, uniformed but unarmed' (Brewer et al., 1996). Germany's protest policing can be situated somewhere between France and England; it seeks close contact with the protesters and uses a more moderate range of weapons compared to France. Northern Ireland's police force can be distinguished from other police forces in the UK because of its special status: it is subject to different weapons regulations and, in some cases, different doctrines. As a former civil war country, it disposes of military equipment and practices (cf. CAJ, 2016). At the same time, it is strongly oriented toward the British model of policing and emphasizes – even more than the mainland does – a dialogue-based approach. Here, policing protest to a high degree means community policing (this is also true in the case of demonstrations, which are potentially violent) in order to achieve a dialogue with protesters.

3. The term 'escalated force' refers to a mission philosophy that was dominant until the 1960s. Its primary tactic, in the sense of an overenforcement of law, is the use of force, which is often exerted until a demonstration disperses. In contrast to this, the philosophy of negotiated management tolerates minor offenses, protects the rights of the demonstrators, and aims to keep the disturbances caused by the demonstration to a minimum. It is based on communication between the police and demonstrators.
4. The history of the stones used in the simulations reflects the increased attention that has been given to the safety of police officers over the years. Initially, real stones were used in trainings in France and England, but that practice soon stopped due to excessive injuries. In France, the cobblestone was eventually replaced by a wooden stone, but even that was thought to be too dangerous, so the rubber stone was finally chosen (as a temporary end point of this development).

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