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The “protecting the security of the state” mantra

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Keynote Speech

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Act I: Setting the Border as a Stage for Emotion

“It was a young man,” the officer told me. “Slouched in his seat, no luggage, avoided eye contact. Maybe he was scared. Maybe nothing was wrong. But still- you must act. You make decisions based on feeling, and you must learn to trust that feeling.”

It wasn’t spectacular. No violence, no arrest. Just a quiet train car near the German border- and yet, this moment captures what I want to talk about today. Because here, we are not simply watching a border being enforced. We are watching the emotional choreography of state power.

My keynote is about the emotional life of the border: how state security is felt, performed, and morally navigated by those tasked with protecting it. By emotions, I mean the feelings officers themselves name such as fear, suspicion, pride, compassion. Affect is different from emotions: it entails the pre-conscious intensities that move between bodies, shaping perception before words.

In border work, emotions and affect are inseparable. Officers engage in emotional labor- regulating their own feelings to foster compliance or calm- while at the same time performing affective labor, generating and sustaining atmospheres of suspicion, urgency, and threat.

My long-term ethnography with the Dutch Military and Border Police (MBP) shows that Europe’s borders are governed not just through law or policy, but through anticipation, affect, and pre-emptive emotion work.

The conference theme invites us to consider the reasoning behind state responses to harm. My argument is that the logos of border control today is not only rational - it is visceral. And if governance is increasingly visceral, what does that mean for criminology? This is not just an analytical question, but an ethical one. I invite you to keep it in mind as we move through the stories and arguments ahead.

My claim is that borders now function as emotional and affective infrastructures: spaces where named emotions (suspicion, compassion, pride) and diffuse atmospheres (urgency, tension, indifference) work together to consolidate power. These emotions do not just “stick” to certain travelers they also adhere to those who guard the border, shaping their sense of duty, loyalty, and moral fatigue. This resonates with what Savio Vammen and Kohl (2023) call “affective borderwork,” showing how European migration governance mobilises emotions like fear, despair, and even hope to deter and control mobility. Where their focus is on return policies and campaigns abroad, my work traces how these affective dynamics take shape in the everyday routines of Dutch border policing.

And at the heart of this affective choreography lies a mantra I heard repeatedly in the field: “We are here to protect the security of the state.”

If you ask a Dutch border control officer what their core task is, most won’t say “checking passports” or “preventing irregular migration.” They will proudly recite the mantra, without hesitation.

This answer is striking. The Dutch Military and Border Police operates under Migration Law, not Criminal Law- their work concerns irregular migration, a civil matter- yet they see themselves as front-line defenders in a broader security theatre.

This is not just a localized quirk of language unique to the Netherlands. Across Europe, migration control has been narratively braided with terrorism, organized crime, and societal destabilization. In EU communications and ministerial speeches, irregular migration is rarely an administrative issue; it is cast as an existential challenge.

The mantra condenses this perfectly. It ties the mundane (train checks and roadside patrols) to a grand project of state protection. And it blurs the line between civil and criminal law, between administrative enforcement and national defense.

As I argue in my recently published book *The Mobility Control Apparatus*, “state security” serves a double function: elevating migration control’s moral authority and expanding its mandate, normalizing measures meant for exceptional threats. From the so-called “migrant crisis” of 2015, to post-Brussels counterterrorism, to today’s talk of “hybrid threats,” the figure of the foreigner and the figure of the threat are continually redrawn.

Crucially, “state security” is a floating signifier- to borrow Laclau’s term- absorbing shifting anxieties and legitimizing new interventions. In the Dutch case, this produces a paradox: border policing framed as urgent security work yet anchored in a legal framework not about crime at all. Still, in officers’ minds and bodies, the work feels morally protective.

Act II: Ethnography of Emotions – The Dutch Military and Border Police

What happens when the language of “protecting the state” is translated into the day-to-day pragmatics of border work?

When I began fieldwork with the Dutch Military and Border Police, I expected to find a regime of rules, procedures, and occasional bursts of visible enforcement. Instead, I found a world steered as much by mood and atmosphere as by legislation- a form of governance that runs on hunches, on what feels off, and on the subtle pull between doubt and duty.

To show you what this looks like up close, I will share four short vignettes from my research. Each is drawn from a different moment in the life of the border: a cultivated hunch on a train platform, the pressure to produce results on a slow day, an act of bureaucratic compassion, and a crisis of conscience over racial profiling.

I present these vignettes not as isolated anecdotes, but as windows into the emotional infrastructure of border work. Each one reveals how feelings are not incidental by-products of the job, but core tools of governance.

Vignette I: Suspicion on the Platform

A small team boards a train from Belgium. They move in silence, a practiced rhythm: one officer by the doors, two walking the aisle, scanning faces. An officer notices a young man slouched in his seat. No luggage. Avoids eye contact. Later, over coffee, he tells me:

“I immediately felt it: something’s not right here. But you never know for sure. You make decisions based on feeling, and you must learn to trust that feeling.”

It is tempting to call this intuition. But in the MBP it is more structured - suspicion that has been taught, refined, and legitimized. Officers talk about stacking plusses: small signs that mean little alone but, together, justify a stop. A non-Western appearance. Clothes unsuited to the season. A certain bag. Sitting too still- or too much movement. Avoiding eye contact-or too much of it. Speaking a foreign language, or Dutch with the “wrong” accent. Even a book can count.

This is not random noticing. It is a professionalized suspicious gaze. Officers describe learning to read the platform like a code: “Tracksuit and cheap sneakers?

Plus.” “No luggage on a long-distance train? Plus.” Each plus tips the scale toward a stop.

The man on the train had several: no luggage, withdrawn posture, and, in the officer’s eyes, a look that did not “match” the other passengers. These cues aligned with the MBP’s task-to detect people who might lack valid documents or a visa. From the perspective of the state, the stop was justified.

Whether the officer was “right” almost beside the point. He did find the man’s Schengen visa had expired. But the process-the scanning, the mental tally of plusses, the reliance on racialized and class-coded markers-is the system itself. It trains officers to convert embodied impressions into state action.

For the man, the outcome was detention and possible removal. For the officer, it was another tick in the day’s tally-another reinforcement that the feeling could be trusted. Each success, however small, confirms the skill of preemption.

And border work is not just about recognizing a moment of suspicion when it arises. It is about sustaining vigilance across hours, shifts, and long stretches when nothing happens.

Vignette II: The Affective Economy of Policing

It is just after lunch on a grey Tuesday. A roadside patrol car idles near the border. For an hour, nothing stands out: family sedans, delivery vans, commuters in hatchbacks. One officer shrugs:

“If we don’t find anything, people think we’re wasting time. So, you start looking harder.”

This is the affective economy of border policing: the quiet pressure to turn vigilance into results. Suspicion is not only a reaction to what’s in front of you; it must be kept alive, even when nothing obvious presents itself.

In the patrols I observed, that pressure was measurable. Statistics on stops were discussed in morning briefings. Teams compared “scores” at the end of the shift. A day with no detections felt unproductive-even if, technically, it meant the border had not been crossed irregularly.

To meet that demand, the gaze sharpens. Officers start looking for smaller cues-a scuffed suitcase, a driver gripping the wheel too tightly, condensation on windows suggesting hidden passengers. Vehicles are read like bodies: “Old Peugeot from Brussels? Plus. Curtain in the back window? Plus. Dutch plates but foreign-looking

driver? Could be a plus.” Each small sign adds weight, even if the underlying suspicion is thin.

The effect is cumulative. The border becomes not just a place to detect irregularity, but a place where irregularity must be found. Vigilance becomes self-sustaining: the more you look, the more you notice; the more you notice, the more you must act.

For the officer, producing suspicion means meeting a mandate, fulfilling a quota, validating the shift. For the person stopped, it can mean interrogation, detention, or expulsion-the sharp edge of a system that rewards action even when the cues are faint.

And sometimes, what lingers is not suspicion but discomfort. A flicker of empathy surfaces, even if it cannot change the outcome. These moments reveal another layer of the border’s emotional infrastructure: the space where rules meet human contact, and where compassion, if it appears at all, is carefully rationed.

Vignette III: Bureaucratic Compassion and Moral Friction

One officer, I call him Willem, tells me about one case that stayed with him. A routine Flixbus check- passengers waiting in the bus for the checks to be over, documents in hand. Among them, a Moroccan woman in her fifties. Her Dutch was flawless. She had lived in the Netherlands for thirty years, but without papers.

She was brought over as a child by an uncle, kept out of school, made to work in the home “as a domestic slave,” she told Willem. Eventually, she broke with the family and built an independent life. But now she was ill, with cancer. If sent back to Morocco, she explained, there would be no medical care for her, it would be a death sentence really.

Willem could have processed her like any other irregular migrant: formal identification, detention, a file in the system. Instead, he went to his supervisor. They found a stopgap- a biweekly reporting requirement to the Dutch immigration authorities that would allow her to stay in treatment in the Netherlands. “I could not take that away from her, the possibility to heal,” he told me.

Eight years later, Willem found out that the woman was deported after another control elsewhere along the Dutch border. Before she left, she sent a message through colleagues to thank Willem. “These are the stories that stick,” he said.

It is easy to read this as an act of kindness, and in one sense it was. But the power imbalance in this scene is immense. Willem’s compassion could soften her

immediate fate but not alter her long-term vulnerability. The same machinery that allowed him to make an exception also ensured she would eventually be removed. For him, the residue was a human connection, a sense of having “done right” in a difficult case. For her, it was years lived in the shadow of expulsion.

This is what “bureaucratic compassion” looks like at the border: empathy channeled through procedural constraints, human concern that operates within- and ultimately upholds- the enforcement apparatus.

Vignette IV: Organizational Dissonance and Affective Contradiction

Another officer told me about a tension that shook his sense of professional integrity. It came after a landmark ruling by the Hague Court of Appeals. The court prohibited any use of ethnicity in border checks. Civil society groups had accused the MBP of racial profiling-and the judges agreed, calling it discrimination “in any form.”

For him, the hardest part was what that ruling implied:

“I’ve had such a hard time with it... because it basically means that all the time I’ve worked in the operation, well, I have discriminated. That makes me feel worthless. Because if there’s one thing I really can’t stand, it’s discrimination.”

Colleagues-especially long-serving ones-began asking themselves the same thing:

“So have we been racist and discriminatory all these years?”

Most insisted they had never acted out of prejudice. Yet many admitted they knew colleagues who had-and still would.

In some brigades, checks were halted for weeks while the organization recalibrated. New guidelines followed: tools for “reflexivity,” reminders to resist the old “racialized hunch.” On paper, it was progress. But in practice? No one knew if anything really changed. Officers themselves doubted it. The routines, the atmospheres, the suspicious gaze all seemed to persist-only now framed in the language of compliance.

This is organizational dissonance at its sharpest. When an officer’s self-image as fair and principled collides with the fact that the very structure of the work has relied on practices they reject. These emotional contradictions don’t break the system. They sustain it. Doubt can be voiced, even widely shared. But it is folded back into operational life. The apparatus adapts. The checks continue. And the contradiction remains unresolved.

Closing reflection for Act II

These vignettes show that emotion is not incidental to Dutch border policing- it is its medium. Suspicion, compassion, pride, and doubt are cultivated as tools of governance, shaped not only by individual officers but by law, politics, and Europe's wider security narrative. Which is where we turn next: the making of Europe's borders as affective infrastructures on a continental scale.

Act III: European Borders as Laboratories of Affective Governance

From Border Control to Border Atmosphere

Borders today are mobile, dispersed, sometimes invisible: in train patrols far from the frontier, in airport data terminals, in the rituals of airline check-in. If they have lost solidity, they have gained mood. A passport check is not just a moment of enforcement; it is the endpoint of an emotional field that precedes it. Political speeches about “crisis,” operational briefings invoking terrorism, and media headlines about “flows” all thicken the air in which an officer decides whether a slouched posture is mere fatigue or a sign of risk.

Ben Anderson calls this the “management of mood”: the crafting of an ambient sense of necessity. His point is that security today governs less by hard rules than by atmosphere, by managing the very mood in which decisions are made, so that suspicion already feels necessary before a word is spoken. You can feel it in the smallest gestures: the clipped “passport, please,” the silence of a patrol moving through a train, the sideways glance that suddenly acquires weight.

Europe as a Bordering Machine

Once you see borders as atmospheres, you notice the machinery that sustains them. The EU doesn’t only coordinate laws; it produces borders as an ongoing process. FRONTEX joint operations, shared training, inter-agency intelligence - these are not just technical exchanges but circulations of perception: scripts for what counts as suspicious, how vigilance should feel, who fits the profile of risk.

In my book, I show how Europe’s borders are increasingly governed through anticipation and pre-emption, blurring the boundaries between civil, criminal, and security domains. What I want to add here is that this governance is not only legal or procedural. It is affective. It is sustained by the small emotional currents of everyday borderwork: suspicion sharpened, hesitation managed, compassion rationed, fatigue absorbed. These affective infrastructures are what give the machinery of control its durability and its reach.

Affect as Technology of Power

At the border, emotions do not just accompany governance-they are its method. Officers do not only check passports; they sort feelings: trust from suspicion, calm from anxiety, worthiness from danger.

Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions “stick” to certain bodies before they even appear: the veiled woman, the Black man, the unaccompanied youth. These figures arrive already charged with affective value, primed to be read as risky or out of place. This is part of what Borrelli, Lindberg, and Wyss call states of suspicion: suspicion that is not incidental but institutionalized, saturating law, bureaucracy, and technology, and producing hierarchies of risk and belonging.

But how does suspicion move from atmosphere to action? Lindberg and Borrelli describe how fleeting impressions—a look, a posture, a document detail—are folded into what they call “state-crafted dominant fictions”: momentary cues that, once circulated through bureaucratic routines, come to look like reliable knowledge. In the field, I saw this dynamic directly: officers stacking “plusses,” learning how to convert doubt into procedure, and having each “successful” stop confirm that their feeling could be trusted. Suspicion here is not simply felt—it is institutionalized, given bureaucratic weight, and made to look inevitable.

Yet suspicion is only one register of border affect. Alongside it, I also found compassion rationed, pride performed, fatigue absorbed. These were not fleeting moods, but patterned oscillations officers learned as part of their professional repertoire. My material echoes what Aliverti and colleagues show elsewhere: that legitimacy depends on navigating moral dilemmas—the pains of bureaucratic care, the compromises of “benevolent policing,” the uneasy coexistence of compassion and control. In practice, officers toggled between these modes: softening a procedure one moment, sharpening suspicion the next, moving with the rhythm of the institution rather than against it.

And there is another register still. As Vega argues, neutrality is not absence but affective labour. The shrug—“these are just the rules”—is not detachment. It is a performance of bureaucratic indifference that cloaks exclusion in calm routine, making it appear ordinary, even benevolent. In my Dutch fieldwork, this indifference was as important to the machinery as suspicion or compassion. Together they formed a choreography, an affective infrastructure that sustains European border governance.

The European Contradiction

Here lies Europe's contradiction. On one hand, it presents itself as the guardian of dignity and rights. On the other, it cultivates atmospheres that normalize suspicion, ration compassion, and blur the line between humanitarian care and security control.

This contradiction is not hidden; it is lived. Officers speak sincerely about protecting dignity while recounting the satisfaction of a "good catch." Policies affirm asylum rights while funding operations that treat mobility itself as a threat.

And it is precisely the affective register- humanitarian and securitarian at once- that makes the contradiction so durable. It gives officers moral purpose while enacting exclusion. It gives the public a sense of safety while masking the costs of that safety. And it produces the tensions we saw in Act II: the doubts, the moral frictions, the quiet recognition that "protecting the state" can mean harming the person in front of you.

Which raises a deeper question: what can we expect from street-level agents when they are tasked with performing a contradiction that Europe itself has produced?

Act IV: Lessons for Criminology

So what does all this mean for criminology?

Criminology has never been one thing. Alongside mainstream approaches that take the state as given, there has always been a critical tradition- one that has insisted on looking at the state itself as a problem, exposing how its practices of punishment and control produce harm as much as they prevent it.

In the times we live in, that tradition is not just valuable, it is essential. With state violence visible at borders across the world, and when entire populations are subjected to exclusion, dispossession, even annihilation, the task of critical criminology is paramount. It calls on us to interrogate the state not as a neutral backdrop but as a set of practices, affects, and legitimising narratives-the very emotional and affective infrastructures we have seen at work in border policing.

For criminology, this opens a double task. First, to bring these infrastructures into view- to read emotions as signals of how governance works. And second, to confront the harms they produce. Deportations despite medical need, routinised racialized suspicion, the erosion of dignity through bureaucratic indifference: none of these appear in crime statistics, yet they are injuries generated and justified by the state. Here, zemiology is crucial. By insisting on looking beyond the confines of criminal law, it helps us recognize borders as engines of non-criminalized harms- chronic uncertainty, institutionalized humiliation, the psychic toll of permanent suspicion.

But analysis alone is not enough. Criminology must also reckon with its own position. Borders are not only out there; they are in here, shaping our categories, our silences, our complicities. If we cannot make the affective life of the border visible, we risk lending cover to the very moral economy that makes its violence appear necessary.

And I want to end not only with a call to us as individual criminologists, but with a call to our professional societies-including the European Society of Criminology. As Hamilton recently argued in her reflections on doing European criminology in a demagogic age, the discipline has too often retreated into narrow, technocratic analyses, hesitant to name its own moral and political stakes. That search for neutrality may feel safe, but in times when exclusionary practices are expanding- and when state security is invoked to normalize violence-such hesitation risks complicity. If borders are sustained not just by fences but by feelings, not just by policies but by moral economies, then our professional communities also have

responsibilities. As members of these societies, we decide – and should be allowed to democratically decide – whether silence will prevail in the face of state violence, or whether criminology will raise its voice to contest the categories, the exclusions, and the harms that are made to appear necessary.

Because at the heart of all of this lies a mantra I heard repeatedly in the field: “We are here to protect the security of the state.” That phrase does more than authorize control. It makes control feel righteous. It cloaks violence in moral necessity. It turns suspicion, compassion, and indifference into forms of labor that stabilize legitimacy. And it shows us that state-making today is not only legal or territorial- it is affective, embodied, and lived.

So the question I leave you with is this: if the border today is built as much out of feelings as it is out of walls and fences, then what-and who-will it take to dismantle it? And if dismantling means undoing the emotional infrastructures that sustain harm, then criminology itself must decide what side it is on: to take the state’s categories at face value, or to contest them; to remain silent, or to refuse complicity.

Thank you.