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# Deleuze and Critical Criminology: Actual Engagements and Virtual Encounters

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## Abstract

Gilles Deleuze is not on (Anglophone) criminologists' map, if not very peripherally. The challenges posed by Deleuze's counterintuitive claims, unconventional terminology and transdisciplinarity have arguably contributed to his underutilisation. However, Deleuze's concepts hold the potential to enrich criminological inquiry by offering specific ontological, epistemological and normative insights into how the 'crime and punishment' predicament is formed, functions and can be interrupted. From this perspective, the following pages first offer a concise overview of Deleuze's philosophical approach, then examine the existing applications of his work in criminology. The second part of this paper proposes new avenues for integrating Deleuzian thought into the criminological field, examining three case studies—cybercriminology, border criminology and visual/sensory criminology. By *encountering* Deleuze, the overarching aim is to support criminologists' (and particularly critical criminologists') search for innovative and transdisciplinary frameworks to rethink old problems and formulate new ones, whilst pointing to new forms of ethical and political action.

*This article is dedicated to Dr. Simon Shaw, in memoriam.*

## Introduction

Michel Foucault famously remarked that the 20th century might one day be remembered as 'Deleuzian' (1970: 885)—it is fair to say that (Anglophone) criminology has certainly not seen this day yet. In fact, criminologists' engagement with Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), one of the most discussed philosophers within continental social and political theory, has been rather scant. While there are countless criminological works influenced by continental scholars from Karl Marx to Roland Barthes, from Pierre Bourdieu to Michel Foucault and

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Jürgen Habermas, to mention a few, there is comparatively very little when it comes to Deleuze. Deleuze's philosophical complexity, counter-intuitive claims and literary language are among the likely reasons for this limited engagement.

This paper is built on the premise that criminologists, and particularly critical criminologists, could benefit from a more sustained dialogue with Deleuze, for two main reasons.

On a general note, engaging with this author is a way of cultivating theoretical pluralism—the availability of multiple theoretical frameworks—in criminology. Heuristically, theoretical pluralism enables the generation of knowledge which is diverse, enriching researchers' understanding of the world. Practically, the abundance of theories facilitates the production of knowledge adaptable to multiple uses for addressing both established and emerging problems. Normatively, in a democratic society, theoretical pluralism holds intrinsic value, offering the freedom to choose among different ontological, epistemological and normative options, instead of restricting researchers' perspectives. The point, here, is that it is better to have more meaningful analytical lenses than less.

A second reason is that encountering Deleuze promises to stimulate criminological imagination. This means contributing to developing criminological approaches that are reflexive, creative, contextual and politically engaged (cf. Young 2011); in short, *critical*. It also means raising new questions and reformulating old ones, suggesting innovative ways of addressing them, not only analytically, but also ethically and politically.

The following pages first briefly introduce Deleuze's thought, then survey existing engagements with this author in the criminological literature, and finally identify additional and alternative uses of Deleuze, providing three case studies: cybercriminology, border criminology and visual/sensory criminology. Each case study is like an encounter which 'forces us to think' (Deleuze 1968/2014: 183), an invitation to a dialogue and not a research or scholarship program (Maglione, 2024). By encountering Deleuze, the overarching aim is to support criminologists' search for original and innovative, critical and transdisciplinary frameworks to make sense of and further develop the work they do.

Regarding the limitations of this paper, Deleuze is widely considered a challenging thinker. This difficulty arises, in part, from the innovative nature of his work and its distinctive idiom within the broader tradition of continental philosophy, itself far from straightforward. I have aimed to present the foundations of Deleuze's philosophy as clearly as possible. Yet, given the complexity and breadth of his work, certain selections and simplifications were necessary, with a theoretically inclined readership in mind. Another strategy for making Deleuze more legible has been to offer three illustrative sketches of how Deleuzian thought might function within specific criminological subfields. Inevitably, specialists in each area will identify reductions and omissions. This is because these cases are used here as examples of possible engagements with Deleuze, pointing towards directions for future research rather than offering comprehensive 'applications'.

Ultimately, this paper should be read as a contribution to theoretical debate within criminology. The work of theory is to open new spaces for thought, raise new questions, invite disagreement and stimulate critical and self-critical reflection. My interpretations of Deleuze are offered here as a resource for that endeavour.

## Introducing Deleuze

### Ontology

Deleuze is first of all a materialist philosopher, interested in how flows, affects, forces—rather than discourse alone—produce reality. Deleuze's materialism is built around the concept of *becoming* (Deleuze 1968/2014: 71), understood as the dynamic structure of reality. The core assumption here is that reality is constantly changing, reality *is* change, and change is nothing but a play of virtual and actual differences, a dynamic relationship between what could be (the virtual) and what is (the actual). The virtual is not imaginary or discursive—it's a set of real, latent tendencies that can give rise to actual events. From this angle, crime, justice and social order are outcomes of ongoing material processes where different possibilities (the virtual) are constantly being actualised as networks of objects, bodies, and events in specific, unpredictable ways. Similarly, identities, states and substances are contingent solidifications of this flux of reality (Deleuze 1968/2014; 1969/2015). The concept of 'being' (the idea of a permanent, defining human quality) is rethought by Deleuze as becoming: being *is* becoming, the human condition is one of change and difference. This perspective is particularly critical of the idea of 'identity', understood as one's naturalised essence. Identity is merely the temporary stabilisation of difference and difference is not difference from something else (or relational difference), but difference in its own right, constitutive difference. Deleuze here advances a Copernican revolution: from the idea of becoming/difference as derivative of being/identity to the notion that the latter pair is parasitic on the former.

Becoming is animated by an immanent force—*desire* (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2013). Reality *is* this change because it is underpinned by desire. Deleuze and Guattari depart radically from the commonsense idea of desire as lack, a 'desire for' something absent. Desire, instead, is 'desire as such': the productive energy that draws human, non-human and more-than-human entities together, creating reality. This force unfolds on a virtual plane of flowing and unstructured tendencies, a real but not-yet-actualised field from which different configurations emerge (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 180). Desire has neither a pre-set object nor fixed subject: it is 'machinic' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 41), a diffused, non-subjective interplay of forces from which fragments of reality (bodies, events, practice, institutions) are actualised. Such an emergence occurs when desire is organised into 'machines'—discrete and dynamic objects linked to others, which function without any pre-set aim (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 2). This, again, is an impersonal process, not intelligently designed by someone/something, but dependent on the fact that in a certain context, certain 'solidifications' of desire are more effective, better functioning than others, since they resonate with already existing machines. This dynamic is continuous, without origin, an-archic: it 'has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 26). For example, prison can be understood as a set of 'rule-breaking/rule-enforcing' machines (legal, architectural, temporal, communicative, etc.) that have historically channelled desire consistently with state-capitalist interests, influencing other machines (e.g., the criminological machine, the media machine, etc.). Prison becomes durable because incarceration resonates within an entire assemblage (see next section) of machines. This means that 'prison abolition' is per se impossible without addressing that broader ecology: there is no prison abolition without radically changing the assemblage

of which prison is only one machinic component. ‘Abolition’ here is not the mere ‘tearing down the walls’, but the exploration of productive ways of actualising desire, of expanding bodies’ capacities through productive machines (e.g., gift economies, mutual aid, commons and care networks, reparation initiatives), fostering affirmative forms of collective life.

## Epistemology

These ontological considerations inform Deleuze’s epistemological approach—*rhizomatic thought*—outlined in the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013). A ‘rhizome’ (literally an underground stem) is a metaphor for a model of knowledge that is non-hierarchical and non-linear. Rhizomatic knowledge looks at reality as an interconnected network of multiple machines, wherein individual and social, normative and descriptive, human and non-human realms are coextensive. Reality has no overarching aim, purpose or destiny—it simply functions and philosophy’s purpose is to chart this ‘functioning’ by proposing new conceptual maps. Notable examples of rhizomatic thinking include Deleuze’s idea of subjectivity as a ‘fold’ (1986/2006), the integration of Freud’s psychoanalysis with the concept of ‘schizoanalysis’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2013) and the critique of Foucault’s idea of ‘disciplinary society’ through the notion of ‘control society’ (1992). Rejecting the opposition between body and world, Deleuze argues that subjectivity is the ‘folding’ of the outside; one becomes a subject by embodying the world, in this way erasing the divide between body and the surrounding reality (1986/2006). Similarly, schizoanalysis aims to overcome Freudian psychoanalysis’ focus on the individual notions of Id, Ego and Superego. Those notions, in fact, are as much individual as social: the psyche is not a fixed inner self, but the result of how desire is shaped (folded) by social and historical forces. Along similar lines, whilst disciplinary societies, emerging in the nineteenth century, are characterised by spatially confined power, twentieth-century societies of control are marked by decentralised power, where individuals are monitored and managed through various mechanisms of surveillance and modulation rather than confinement and discipline.

This epistemological perspective underpins Deleuze’s methodological instruments. Among these, the most discussed is certainly the *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 2). Rather than a tool though, it would be more accurate to think of the assemblage as a methodological perspective, a way of looking at reality as a constellation of heterogeneous machines forming a functional whole. The emphasis is placed on how these networks of elements produce ‘molar’ (rigid, structured, stable) and ‘molecular’ (flexible, plural, adaptable) effects, and on how they make and unmake reality through ‘lines of flight’ which actualise change (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 14). Molarity involves the translation of desire into transcendental, fixed signifiers, such as when the legal machine crystallises migrant flows into the categories of ‘legal/illegal immigrant’; whereas molecularity refers to the diffuse, high-speed processes through which multiple actors (e.g., lawyers, charities, migrants themselves) continuously negotiate legal meanings and associated identities; whilst lines of flight refer to escaping established structures of power and creating new possibilities for life, e.g. when migrants and local organisations create informal solidarity networks that sabotage restrictive border regimes. Assemblages then operate differently depending on whether they unfold within ‘smooth’ (open and continuous) or ‘striated’ (segmented and organised) spaces (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 409). Assemblages in smooth spaces are dynamic and fluid, whilst those in striated spaces reproduce order and

control. Police, through these lenses, appear as a network of bodies, sensory modalities, codes and affects operating in the smooth space of everyday policing through molecular practices such as sharing intelligence, exercising discretion and assessing credibility. These fluid processes become molarised in tribunals or courts, where they are stabilised through institutional roles, procedural rules and legal categories such as ‘defendant’, ‘illegal immigrant’ or ‘failed asylum seeker’. These are then challenged when people collectively create new forms of solidarity that exceed the identities imposed by legal machines.

Finally, the potential connections and relations between elements within an assemblage are arranged according to an ‘abstract machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 81), a historical diagram that gives the network coherence—e.g. ‘racial control’ in the case of police (cf. Wicks 2024). Politics’ aim is to unearth and re-shape such diagrams.

## Politics

Deleuze defined himself as a ‘Marxist’ political philosopher (1990/1995: 171). Like Marx, Deleuze (with Guattari) is interested in *production*. However, unlike Marx, he does not view production as humanity’s material transformation of nature to meet its needs. Production is ‘desiring-production’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2013: 11), an immanent, social-individual, creative force that underlies all existence. This idea affects how Deleuze conceptualises his political targets: capitalism and the state. Capitalism is not merely a social-economic system, but the broader process of disrupting and freeing social and psychic relations by manipulating and exploiting desire. Conversely, the state is the apparatus that centralises and captures social energies. Capitalism centres on general equivalence: all things can be equated through money, making them commodifiable and exchangeable. The state pivots around the idea of totalisation—the imposition of a central principle around which reality is shaped. Capitalism and state are oppositional yet mutually dependent. Capitalism is like a centrifugal wave, it constantly ‘deterritorialises’ and ‘destratifies’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2013: 3), that is, breaks down old structures and identities and creates new ones, whilst the state (like a centripetal wave) engages in reterritorialisation and stratification, attempting to stabilise and regulate reality. This state-capitalist diagram (self-contradictory and yet generative) manipulates desire by, on one hand, freeing production through the intensification of libidinal energies (e.g. through consumerism) and, on the other, recapturing desire through other codes and representations (e.g. in nationalism and the nuclear family), ultimately blocking revolutionary energies, producing un-freedom. This process affects both the social and the individual body and psyche. State-capitalist forces align libidinal forces with market and sovereign interests, subjugating individuals and causing a ‘microfascist’ closure to difference, a diffuse form of social and psychic impoverishment (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 9).

Against the state-capitalist diagram, Deleuze advocates for a strategy of social-individual resistance—*nomadology* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 409). Nomadology, drawing on the metaphor of the nomad, challenges fixed forms of thought and social organisation that capture and subjugate desire such as bureaucratic apparatuses, the nuclear family, the consumer identity or religious dogmas. Although state-capitalist operations try to immobilise and exploit desire, something always remains latent or uncaptured, a virtuality. Nomadic resistance involves drawing from these unrealised energies, turning desire into a ‘war machine’ against state-capitalist operations (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2013: 409). By cre-

ating new affective regimes, i.e. new ways of feeling and thinking, resistance can subvert conventional norms and identities, offering alternative perspectives and possibilities for life. This resistance is both reactive and proactive: by redirecting desire it can instigate critical and self-critical contestations of dominant identities, disrupting how people perceive themselves and relate to the world, which can lead to broader social transformations (Deleuze and Guattari 1975/1986). Deleuze views this micro/macro-political action as a crucial component of broader revolutionary moments and movements, one to be intensified, though with the awareness that, as seen above, freeing desire may lead to un-freedom, to libidinal exploitation. The problem then becomes how to engage, develop and use desire to enhance bodies' capacities of affecting and being affected, to create and experience life, critically and self-critically. There is no set answer to or grand plan for this, although Deleuze often sees certain (non-representational) artistic experiences as a potent example of the creation of non-fascist life (e.g. Deleuze 1981/2017; cf. Foucault 1977).

## Deleuze and Criminology: A Literature Review

The Anglophone criminological literature engaging with Deleuze is limited in extension. Nevertheless, some significant contributions merit attention for understanding the current relationship between criminology and the French philosopher. Much of this scholarship is not recent and this, in addition to its limited extension, is a further reason to encounter Deleuze today.

### Post-Structuralist Critique

The first body of criminological research on Deleuze concerns engagements with his rhizomatic perspective, often cited as an example of 'post-structuralist' approaches in criminology.

Arrigo et al. (2005), Crewe (2013) and Duso and Arrigo (2018) provide some comprehensive critical overviews of postmodernism's contribution to criminology, considering Deleuze's insights for this field. Crewe (2013), in particular, explores the work of Deleuze and Guattari to understand the intricate socio-cultural factors shaping criminal behaviour, reflecting on how actions (including those defined as 'crimes') emerge from networks of disparate entities acting on a constantly changing environment of knowledge and identities. Along similar lines, Milovanovic (2007), building on an early work on 'transgression' (Milovanovic 2000), uses rhizomatic theory as a dynamic framework for understanding and advancing social justice, challenging the static and often exclusionary nature of conventional criminal justice models. Milovanovic further develops this line of enquiry through a complex study on the ontology of criminology which also draws on Deleuze and Guattari (1968).

Halsey (2001) specifically considers how the ideas of multiplicity and rhizome can enlighten a specific criminological subject—crime prevention. Halsey problematises the relationship between 'audience' and 'text' within crime prevention strategies, suggesting that such initiatives often merely aim at generating certain politically appealing narratives rather than addressing the underlying issues of crime. This critique is then complemented by a demand for a Deleuze-inspired 'minor' criminology that foregrounds the multiplicity of crime prevention initiatives.

Similarly, Lippens and Van Calster (2000) employ the concept of rhizome to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about organised crime and its regulation. They argue that ‘organisations’ can be seen as clusters of events or accidents, proposing to rethink ‘organisation’ and ‘organisational crime’ as complex hybridities. More recently, Arrigo and Sellers’ (2021) collection expands this strand of Deleuzian rethinking of criminological categories, focussing on the emergence of a ‘pre-crime society’ where predictive policing, actuarial justice and surveillance techniques create a hyper-securitised environment aligned with Deleuze’s control society. This use of Deleuze to ‘expand’ the bounds of criminology is shared by Van Brakel and Govaerts (2025). They try to invigorate digital criminology by proposing to combine zemologist insights with a technological and relational sensitivity, broadening the concept of ‘social harms’ to ‘rhizomatic harms’. Similarly, Phillips (2017) argues that the metaphor of the ‘desistance journey’ in probation is inadequate to capture the rhizomatic (complex, social, unpredictable and messy) process of desistance from crime. Drawing on rhizomatic theory, Phillips suggests understanding desistance as an ongoing process.

## Assemblage Theory

The concept of ‘assemblage’ is the idea from Deleuze (and Guattari) that has arguably garnered the most interest from Anglophone criminologists.

This concept has proven particularly valuable to rethink surveillance. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) notably analyse the functional convergence of once-discrete surveillance systems into a ‘surveillant assemblage’ which operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows, creating ‘data doubles’. This emerging assemblage reshapes the purposes and hierarchies of surveillance and alters the institution of privacy. Similarly, Haggerty, Wilson and Smith (2011) address the role of surveillance in crime control. Introducing a Special Issue of *Theoretical Criminology* on the topic, they outline the need for new, largely Deleuze-inspired, theorising on surveillance, noting some of the challenges involved. This approach is shared by Mantello’s (2016) exploration of the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘prescient’ shift in surveillance assemblages and of how risk technologies in local law enforcement are transforming conventional criminal justice practices. This analysis, building on Haggerty and colleagues’ work, investigates the alignment of corporate strategies and law enforcement initiatives through media, connectivity and consumer opt-in methods that encourage individuals to become self-surveilling citizens.

Another pioneering application of assemblage theory in criminology is Schuilenburg’s (2015) analysis of security’s dynamic nature and its governance. Schuilenburg introduces the idea of ‘security assemblage’, i.e. the network of actors, places and practices which unfolds at both the molar and molecular level. This is exemplified by collaboration between the police and partners such as energy companies and housing corporations, in dealing with (and generating) security issues. Along similar lines, Halsey (2017) offers a Deleuzian critique of modernist approaches to environmental crime, arguing that such accounts render ecological issues in static terms which oversimplify the causes and effects of environmental harm. This work challenges categorical analyses of environmental damage and advocates for viewing nature as a dynamic and problematic assemblage. Halsey ultimately emphasises the need for a new critical approach to document and reinterpret environmental conflicts.

The concept of assemblage has also been adopted to reconceptualise the internal dynamics of criminal justice systems. Campbell's work on policing 'paedophilia' (2016) uses assemblage theory to explore the cultural dynamics of digital vigilantism. Campbell's contention is that this form of policing is expanding and this dynamic is driven and activated by emotional connections, performative political imaginations and culturally mediated dialogical practices which constitute a distinctive assemblage. Similarly, Carline, Gunby and Murray (2020) employ the concept of assemblage to critique the criminal justice system's response to sexual violence. They propose moving beyond the representational legalistic understanding of sexual violence towards a materialistic and affect-oriented approach. In a Deleuzian fashion, they emphasise the importance of embodiment and ontological regimes to generate radical new ways to address this issue.

More recently, Crockett Thomas (2020) examines the ontological implications of using assemblage theory to research crime, discussing how this approach can provide insights into the scale and dynamics of crime events, potentially transforming criminological research and practice. Childs (2025), along similar lines, applies the concept of assemblage to conceptualise a specific type of crime, online illicit markets, contextualising the various human and non-human elements that shape criminal e-commerce platforms over time.

## Desire, Subjectivity and Deviance

Deleuze's concept of desire, together with his dynamic idea of subjectivity—which entails rejecting fixed identities and essentialist categories—has been used by criminologists to shed light on the forces underlying 'deviance'.

A criminological subfield wherein Deleuze sometimes features when talking about deviance and subjectivity is cultural criminology. Hayward (2012) explicitly refers to Deleuze's rhizome and desire when analysing the connection between crime, aesthetic experience and digital culture. Similarly, Halsey and Young (2006) examine the affective dimensions of graffiti, focussing on the libidinal dynamics driving graffiti artists and on the subjectivity-making processes involved in this form of often-criminalised art.

Taking a different approach, Hallsworth and Young (2008) challenge the prevailing perception of gangs as linked to urban violence, arguing that street-based violence cannot always be attributed to gangs. They offer an alternative view that critiques mainstream gang talk, charged with neglecting the libidinal dimensions of street violence and with conflating gang and street violence. Along similar lines, Henriksen and Miller (2012) explore how violence shapes the experiences of young women in marginalised contexts. Viewing violent conflicts as strategies for escaping marginality, they analyse the micropolitics of these strategies through ethnographic data. They use Deleuze to rethink violent young women as not simply performing a type of femininity or mimicking masculinity, but as engaged in unique processes of subject formation, enacting lines of flight from pre-set identities.

When it comes specifically to subject formation within the penal (particularly prison) context from a Deleuzian perspective, Arrigo and Milovanovic (2009) provide a conceptually rich and thought-provoking analysis. They question the idea of penal rehabilitation as a process of 'fixing' deviance within a system that remains fundamentally structured around exclusion. Instead, drawing on a Deleuzian ethics of immanence and becoming, they propose an approach to justice that prioritises the creation of new relations and the expansion of human capacities.

More recently, Brottveit and Fransson (2024) investigate the complexities of prison release and re-entry in a digitalised society. Adopting Deleuze's concept of 'societies of control', they identify three types of complexities: unforeseen events that delay release, digital gatekeepers in public welfare services and new forms of social control and pain through online tracking. Their analysis questions binary understandings of prison boundaries and provides insights into digital punishment and control. Similarly, using the Deleuzian idea of control combined with that of desire, Rye and Oppegaard (2023) explore how the penal institution in Norway increasingly integrates elements from other institutions, blurring institutional borders and raising questions about social control in a de-differentiated society.

Collectively, these works illustrate some possible engagements with Deleuze's philosophy within criminology, often focusing on a single Deleuzian concept to shed light on specific criminological issues. Yet, there remains considerable room for an updated and integrated reflection on how Deleuze's thought may work within emerging criminological subfields. What is distinctive about the second part of this paper is that the following three 'encounters' connect the ontological, epistemological and political dimensions of Deleuzian analysis in order to expand the criminological imagination. Separating these dimensions by individually 'applying' concepts or approaches associated with any one of them may be generative, but ultimately reduces Deleuzian thought's potency, whereas an integrated and philologically sensitive encounter is more likely to preserve its heuristic and normative capacities.

## Virtual Encounters, Future Directions

Each of the following encounters is informed (at the same time) by Deleuze's ontological concepts of desire and becoming, his epistemological ideas of rhizome and assemblage, his anthropological understanding of subjectivity as a fold and his micro/macro political critique of the state-capitalist predicament. These are machinic encounters, intended to problematise theoretical dualisms (descriptive/normative, discursive/material, body/mind, crime/harm, state/capitalism) and reductionisms (linear causality, the disconnect between macro and micro, social and individual, and the reliance on legal categories) and their anthropocentric, rationalist and psychologising underpinnings (inherent in concepts like responsibility, identity and individual agency). Machinic means libidinal, diffused, non-hierarchical, non-linear, processual, impersonal, non-identitarian. These encounters do not come with a 'user manual', but with a warning: be aware of the risks implicit in their commodification, as both the freeing and the control of desire may ultimately prove destructive.

## From Cybercriminology to Cyber-Assemblages

Cybercriminology is one of the most dynamic contemporary developments within the study of 'crime and punishment'. However, scholars have sometimes lamented the limited depth of interdisciplinary engagement in this subfield (Powell, Stratton and Cameron 2018: 11). Recently, numerous attempts have been made to develop new theoretical frameworks, drawing mainly on scholarship about digital society (e.g., drawing on authors such as Manuel Castells or Scott Lash) (e.g. Yar and Steinmetz 2019). This body of research broadens the scope of conventional cybercrime studies, highlighting the necessity of moving beyond

‘digital dualism’ (i.e., online/offline divide) and sparking extremely interesting theoretical debates. Yet this magmatic area presents endless potential for further conceptual enrichment (Gordon, McGovern, Thompson and Wood 2022).

From a Deleuzian perspective, not only the divide between technological and social, but also the very idea of a ‘techno-social’ complex (Mackenzie 2022), would benefit from a revision, for ontological reasons. Technology and society are coextensive. The social world is inherently technical, as much as the technical is inevitably social. Similarly, technology is corporeal (technologies are extensions of human bodies) as much as bodies are technical (human organs are technical instruments themselves). ‘Society’, ‘technology’ and ‘body’ are not ontologically separated entities, as they are made of the same force – desire, solidified in the form of a series of interconnected ‘machines’, productive of different effects depending on how they are combined (cf. Braidotti 2013). These machines include human, non-human and more-than-human components assembled together (user, software, hardware, information networks, but also social relationships, practices and institutions, including law-makers and law-enforcement) and are organised according to diagrams of power shaped by historical contingencies. Identifying the components of this *cyber-assemblage* and understanding how it works is preliminary to deciphering its underpinning political diagrams, ultimately creating opportunities for shaping micro/macro political change (cf. Buchanan 2021; DeLanda 2006).

Along these lines, cybercrime and cybercontrol, here, appear as the result of the interaction of machines which actualise, from a state of unstructured desire, specific practices, institutions and objects wherein social, corporeal and technological aspects are not simply connected but coextensive (cf. Van Brakel and Govaerts 2025). The result is an assemblage of machines which cuts across the human/technical divide (Deleuze and Guattari 1975/1986: 81). ‘Cyber-stalking’, for instance, is not simply stalking-plus-technology, an offline behaviour mediated by online tools, just as cybercontrol is not cops-plus-technology, humans using some digital technologies to catch offenders. Cyber-stalking is the result of the functioning of a cyber-assemblage that produces new forms of being and acting. The ‘cyber’ is not a layer added to an otherwise human reality, but names the continuity through which human and technical realities are ceaselessly co-produced.

This cyber-assemblage generates hybrid (and self-hybridising) subjectivities (rather than ‘data doubles’ (Haggerty and Ericson (2000))), embodying and disembodying, territorialising and deterritorialising themselves. Cyber subjectivities are shaped by libidinal processes that occur in a dynamic smooth/striated space (the net, the digital world actualised through hardware and data centres). Such processes operate through subtle (molecular) adjustments and feedback as well as direct (molar) positive and negative rewards. Cyber-actors’ bodies are continuously and simultaneously coded as data and profiles, which categorise and sort people in ways that influence their access to resources, opportunities and spaces, and then decoded as virtual subjects dematerialised through digital networks. These hybrid subjectivities are libidinal machines; they fold desire in, their boundaries are not defined by biological flesh or physical environments, but the machinic flesh, the affective combination of material/immateral reality in which they are immersed and they contribute to creating.

The process of *becoming-cyber* is therefore, on the one hand, a form of dis-embodiment, reducing the gradient of solidity of human beings dematerialised as flows, and on the other, it entails the affirmation of the material element, an embodied process of affective subjugation to this assemblage (cf. Floridi 2026). A phishing attack is not simply an offender deceiv-

ing a victim ‘online’, but a working assemblage of human perception, interface design, platform architecture, financial infrastructures, affects and automated systems. Not only does harm emerge from the interactions between these heterogeneous components, but so too do the subjects of harm: offending and victimised actors, their needs, interests, habits and worldviews, are modulated through these productive interactions (Deleuze 1992).

It follows that complex cyber-actors like generative artificial intelligence (AI), cannot be understood as isolated subjects to be held ‘responsible’ in the way humans traditionally are within (criminal) law (cf. Panattoni 2025). Nor does searching for the human ‘behind’ them make sense. Instead, AI is part of a self-affirming cyber-assemblage that includes human designers, corporate entities, economic systems and social structures which do not simply ‘work together’ but constitute each other.

Responsibility, thus, is not simply diffused, spread across the assemblage, but materialised/dematerialised as a continuous human, non-human and more-than-human event. Cyber-actors are neither fully autonomous agents nor simple tools. Their harms are often the cumulative effects of multiple, sometimes uncountable, actions which are difficult to attribute to anybody.

The moral question of allocating individual blame for wrongdoing becomes an *ethical* question of evaluating whether cyber-assemblages expand or diminish bodies’ capacities to affect and be affected—their power, under which circumstances and how. Yet this ethical question cannot be detached from broader, preliminary political issues: how do new cyber-assemblages reconfigure the social-individual psyche? What new modes of control, freedom or violence emerge from them? How do they reshape power relations? Addressing these questions requires understanding how different machines within the cyber-assemblage produce particular outcomes and how they might be preventatively shaped. The issue at stake is therefore imagining a democratic political praxis in the design of such assemblages which cannot be left to the market and the state.

From a strategic standpoint, this analysis demands addressing the abstract diagram of power that currently informs cyber-assemblages and drives their functioning. State-capitalist forces render corporations and markets, supported by state agencies, key sites of de/regulation of *cyber-desire* (through e.g. selective criminalisation, marketing data collection, credit systems and other forms of economic surveillance). This diagram, on the one hand, captures desire and, on the other, harnesses microfascist tendencies. Examples of this dynamic are self-repression through algorithmic conditioning of behaviours or self-censorship due to surveillance and self-quantification, all eroding spaces for a critical and self-critical becoming-cyber.

Conversely, this approach suggests looking for forms of resistance decoupled from capitalist/state-captured desire. Certain forms of hacking, for instance, could be interpreted as a line of flight from the capture/harness of desire, forging new forms of social solidarity and creating new possibilities for the cyber-assemblage (cf. Coleman 2014). Clearly, this is not the case of ransomware attacks or state-sponsored intrusions which instead reinforce state-capitalist arrangements of desire. Hacking is a line of flight only when it works against (instead of serving) the state-capitalist capture, as in the case of anti-censorship tools against oppressive regimes, whistleblower platforms and open source security tools for nonprofits developed by ethical hacktivists (cf. Himanen 2002).

Ultimately, given the human, non-human and more-than-human processual structure of cyber-assemblages, it is crucial to move beyond forms of resistance centred solely on the

human as a normative category (e.g. human rights) (cf. Rogers 2020). The challenge is not simply to create new rights, but to imagine forms of political praxis that both challenge human exceptionalism by engaging with the libidinal dynamics animating cyber-assemblages and create inclusive and horizontal spaces to democratically rethink these complex ecologies.

## From Border Criminology to Nomadic Criminology

From a theoretical viewpoint, recent works in border criminology advocate for broadening the scope of criminological analytical frameworks when studying the intersection between border control and criminalisation (Brandariz 2021), while recognising that the late-modern state is dispersed throughout the social body. These analyses also push for transitioning from a focus on crime to a focus on harm (e.g. Soliman 2021).

What could Deleuze's contribution to these debates be? Deleuze helps us disconnect borders both from the categories of nation-state and the citizen, and from those of governmentality and neoliberalism, using a rhizomatic approach. Hard (sovereign) borders are linked either to an idea of politics in which the state functions through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion or to a neoliberal perspective that sees borders as socio-economic thresholds between a population's poverty and wealth. Instead, a rhizomatic perspective requires us to consider the dynamic, affective, state-capitalist functioning of borders-as-processes which captures and harnesses desire expressed through migratory flows.

Borders are hybrid: at once both 'smooth' (dynamic spaces of circulation) and 'striated' (static, vertically organised spaces). These two dimensions interact, shaping borders as *bordering*: a process of materialisation and dematerialisation rather than a material geographical zone (cf. Soliman 2023: 726; Walters 2006: 193). Metaphorically, borders are like non-Newtonian fluids: they possess properties of both liquids and solids. One can slowly 'dip' a hand into them (as a high-skilled professional) like a liquid, but if you 'hit' the border (as a racialised asylum seeker), it will feel solid. Solid-striated bordering *oedipalises*: akin to the Oedipus complex in Freudian psychoanalysis, it reduces the complexity of human mobility to a simplistic framework involving the father (sovereign country of destination), mother (failed state of origin) and child (the migrant, infantilised and punished or rewarded) (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2013). Liquid-smooth bordering, on the other hand, harnesses desire, creating a fluid social context wherein rigid positions, rules and roles are blurred like in processes of inter-cultural contamination across the border (Rogers 2020). This means that borders are socially diffused hard-soft assemblages of material, psychological and semantic machines which capture and re-shape human mobility.

From this angle, the shift from traditional physical borders to increasingly non-territorial, digitalised borders is a consequence of the intensification of the processes of bordering, related to recent technological advances (cf. Weber and McCulloch 2019). Pre-screening travellers, offshore detention, and e-borders are not merely reconfigurations of borders but expressions of an abstract diagram of power, where state control is combined with private for-profit intervention to deterritorialise migration flows in order to extract libidinal resources from them. The current intensification of hybrid bordering is a political phenomenon related to the libidinal crisis of nation states. The state-led symbolic harnessing of libidinal energies animating migration flows (e.g. through mediated deportations), operated in accord with private actors often bringing about new technologies, becomes an instrument

to manage such a crisis. The agonising nation state needs an injection of ‘libido’ from the active bodies crossing the borders, by material expulsion (political exploitation) or partial integration (economic exploitation).

‘Bordering’ is thus the condition for certain behaviours to be bundled under the overarching label of ‘crime’ (or ‘social harm’). Bordering humans, their flows and connections is productive insofar as it creates ex nihilo ‘crimes’ or ‘harms’ by categorising individuals as integral or alien to the state-capitalist order (Deleuze and Guattari 1975/1986; cf. Ramsay 2022). This is both a semiotic and material process, inscribing onto migrants’ bodies their transitional condition as if it were an essential anthropological feature. Here, ontologically, the starting point is not a pre-given category of harm or crime but the libidinal act of *crossing-the-border*, an act of ‘transgression’ (from the Latin verb ‘transgredi’, ‘trans’ that means ‘through’ and ‘gredi’ which means ‘to go’), a line of flight that challenges and redefines existing social boundaries, materialised as borders (cf. Milovanovic 2000). Transgression is not a singular event but an ongoing libidinal process that disrupts and reconfigures the social order. Migrants keep ‘crossing-the-border’ whilst stuck in administrative centres or exploited whilst doing informal work. They *are* transgressions themselves, actors of becoming that destabilise power structures, while creating new forms of subjectivity and social relations. As such, transgressions are never inherently crimes or harms, but political acts as much as migrants are political actors.

It follows that bordering occurs not only at formal state borders but also in any contested social space where socio-political borders are negotiated. When individuals are assembled as social ‘marginalities’—like ravers and squatters, mobile-home dwellers or drug-users in parks—transgressing supposedly accepted behavioural rules, they *get bordered*, turned into spatialised and yet dynamic threats to the socio-political status quo. They are expelled and yet retained as visible libidinal resources, objects of ‘hard’ (policing and punishment) and ‘soft’ (economic integration and exploitation) interventions, leveraged for the political legitimisation of those that by ‘removing’ marginalities can claim that ‘something is being done’.

This re-conceptualisation is intrinsically normative. Bordering (and getting bordered) is both a capitalist and state phenomenon. Capitalist bordering exploits their energies, flows, and connections, harnessing desire, making it ‘work’. The state pole of bordering, then, reterritorialises humans through policing and criminalisation, reducing differences, capturing lines of flight. This state-capitalist process converges in creating one main result: the border is symbolically introjected, folded in—bordered humans, exploited through racialisation and expulsion or integration and control (cf. Collins 2020).

In short, the focus here is not on how borders exclude, criminalise or govern mobility and how this shapes social control institutions (e.g. Aas Franko and Bosworth 2013), but on how bordering generates different ways of becoming human. Borders do not only separate insiders from outsiders, they organise bodies’ capacities to move, connect, exchange, and settle, thereby actualising distinct modes of mobility shaping human life. The tourist, the refugee, the undocumented migrant, the international student are not simply ‘recognised’ at the border but produced through these differential actualisations of mobility. Crime and harm emerge, then, when particular modes of mobility are differentially valued within state-capitalist assemblages, creating some bodies’ capacities while constraining those of others.

A *nomadic criminology* requires not only advocating for migrants’ fulfilment of human needs and challenging the precarious liberal balance between security and human rights. It also demands interventions that operate against the capitalist/state-controlled capture of

human mobility. Nomadism exceeds both the state-dependent protection offered by human rights and the capitalist economisation of migrant bodies, for it rejects the rhetoric of the ‘national/economic citizen’. Since people-crossing-the-border express the multiplicity that *is* reality, then, it is the idea of citizenship based on belonging to/exclusion from sovereign nation states which is the source of harm. The issue becomes advocating for changing the relationship between the people and the space they traverse and occupy. This entails considering differentiated modes of belonging, some static and other dynamic, based on people’s needs, adjusting legal entitlements to such variation and not vice versa (cf. Wiertz 2021). A nomadic criminology is a *political-libidinal* criminology which involves detaching migration from both the nation and the market, looking instead at expanding people’s capacities of transgression.

## From Sensory Criminology to Affective Criminology

Currently, there are thought-provoking debates within visual and sensory criminology around the necessity to broaden visual criminology’s mono-sensorial focus by integrating all sensory inputs—sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—to understand how they inform the experience of crime and punishment (e.g. Brown and Carrabine 2019; McClanahan and South 2020; Herrity, Schmidt and Warr 2021).

Deleuze’s rhizomatic thinking suggests adopting a non-linear, non-hierarchical perspective that foregrounds the wholeness of sensory experiences when studying crime. Fragmenting the sensory realm into visual, auditive, olfactive etc., is at best a heuristic abstraction. Sensory experience is holistic, processual and contextual—a continuous series of processes intertwined with the environment in which they occur. A rhizomatic analysis would emphasise the decentralised connections between actors’ sensory experiences, highlighting how the immanent and affective relationship between body and world is diffused, non-dualist and non-anthropocentric. This analysis contrasts the semiotic approach that tends to see affect as emotional responses to aesthetic and physical experiences and the body as the site of affective experience. The world *is* affective, not just the responses to it, and the body is more than a sensating interface, it is integral to the world.

‘Crime’, as one possible configuration of the sensory-emotional experience, is part of broader assemblages involving human flesh, legal practices, social discourses, technologies and institutional powers. This approach dissolves the boundaries between bodily perception and its contexts, suggesting that sensory experiences cannot be fully understood in isolation from the multiple factors that constitute their *worldly integrality*—the fact that humans are immanent to the world, not separated but integral, coextensive to it.

This approach aims to overcome both the (Cartesian) body-mind dualism and the (phenomenological) body-world opposition. The body, in fact, is a machine plugged into other machines, constituting a distinctive libidinal-machinic assemblage. ‘Body’ for Deleuze is not merely a mass of cells feeling emotions as neurochemical reactions mediated by societal processes. The body is *body-machine*: a product of machinic processes that actualise from constellations of organic, social, cultural, and political components a certain segment of reality. A human body is therefore always already a relational body entangled with social bodies, organisations, animal bodies, immaterial (e.g. digital) bodies. Each body is plugged into an environment from which it is differentiated by contingent diagrams of power that prioritise certain combinations of elements over others. A body is, therefore, an active

combination of organic and inorganic elements, interwoven, all characterised by different degrees of ‘affect’ and ‘affection’, of active and passive passions. An example of a body is a protest movement where flesh, voices, ideas, symbols, spaces and actions come together as an organised force which affects and is affected (experiencing joy, anger, rage) by other interconnected bodies (state apparatuses, digital platforms, corporations, human beings).

As Deleuze argues in his book on Spinoza (1968/1992), ‘affect’ is a body’s ability to be changed by and change others. It is an intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state to another (e.g. from joy to anger) and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. ‘Affection’ is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body.

Within this framework, a ‘crime’ is the affective result of two or more (human, non-human, more-than-human) bodies *colliding* with each other, determining a decrease in those bodies’ capacities of affecting and being affected. Crime is an affective diminution which ultimately leads to the partial or total decomposition of the relation which constitutes bodies as social entities. An assault, for example, does not only injure a body but disrupts the network of relations through which that body exists. Clearly, not every collision is ‘criminal’ (as much as not every state-defined ‘crime’ is an affective collision), since some collisions can create positive affections, increasing affective power, like a social protest or other forms of political mobilisation.

In short, a Deleuzian perspective understands crime itself as an affective event emerging from encounters between bodies within assemblages through which their capacities to affect and be affected are diminished. Noise, light, smell, touch, bodily proximity, and feelings are not simply ‘the context’ or consequences of crime, but components of crime itself, its affective texture.

Along these lines, Deleuze can help rethink one of the most recent developments in sensory criminology, i.e. the growing interest in sensory landscapes, in how environments are designed to evoke specific affective states to prevent/respond to crimes (e.g. Young, Rogers and McClanahan 2023; Gillespie 2025). This can be observed in urban design for crime prevention, where lighting, soundscapes and spatial arrangements create atmospheres that are supposed to deter criminal behaviour or make residents feel more secure (e.g. police’s use of sound cannons or controlled lighting in protest management). From a Deleuzian perspective, the issue here is understanding the *affective politics of sensory control*: how the state-capitalist diagram of power shapes environments (through, e.g., police and/or private entities) to organise affective collisions in particular ways—rendering them passive, discouraging unbounded social interactions and facilitating the policing of urban spaces, or pushing them towards consumerist behaviour.

The overarching normative issue here is that the body and its affects are a political phenomenon: they are shaped by the forces of capital and state, their capacities constrained or expanded by manipulating the assemblages within which they are embedded. Prisons, policed public gatherings, and ‘crime-proof’ urban spaces are not just places of physical control, but spaces which constitute the body’s capacities. Here, resistance is not solely challenging or rejecting sensory controls, but also about reconfiguring affective relations. Some social movements, for instance, can be understood as creating new connections that challenge the dominant assemblages of power, exceeding the control mechanisms of capital and the state. Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter or, more recently, organisations campaigning against the genocide in Gaza, with their occupations, teach-outs, assemblies

and marches, are examples of the reconfiguration of public spaces as sites of affective and productive resistance. They have created new bonds based on a wide range of affects (e.g. rage, frustration, grief, hope) related to the mass killing of civilians, economic inequality and racial injustice. Giving people a shared vocabulary and physical presence to oppose state-capitalist structures, creating ‘excessive’ forms of becoming together, is a critical way of re-shaping the sensory landscape.

## Conclusions

Deleuze problematises social constructionism and Freud’s psychoanalysis while unorthodoxly embracing Marx and Spinoza. He speaks of ‘desire as such’, rather than desire for something and combines the human with the non-human. Criticising both the state and capitalism in search of a non-fascist life, this unruly philosophy holds promise for those interested critically in ‘crime and punishment’. Thus, after providing an overview of Deleuze’s key concepts and a review of the existing engagements with his work in the (English-speaking) criminological literature, this paper has conjured up three encounters between Deleuze and criminology. Each encounter is *virtual*—a space of real possibilities and not a comprehensive research/scholarship program. Each encounter ‘forces us to think’ (Deleuze 1968/2014: 183), it is an invitation to a more sustained dialogue, raising a number of issues, reframing older problems and pointing to new pathways for future engagements.

Within cybercriminology, Deleuze helps not only to contest the ‘digital dualism’ characterising this field but also to enrich the idea of a techno-social complex put forth by more recent and more theoretically refined analyses. We should think of the social-technological-corporeal realm as the solidification of the libidinal flows into a series of machines plugged into each other. In line with this, when focussing on ‘cyber-actors’, the subject-making processes integral to the functioning of those machines operate at the affective-technical-embodiment level. This machinic process generates subjectivity involved in embodying and disembodying itself, continuously, at different paces and speeds, demanding a reformulation of how we understand, and address politically, harm and responsibility.

Deleuze can also contribute to border criminology’s conceptual redefinition of the border, moving beyond its understanding as an instrument of either nation-state sovereignty and citizenship or neoliberal governmentality. Rhizomatic borders are hybrid: both viral ‘smooth’ spaces of circulation and ‘striated’, harder, static, vertically organised confines. Borders are assemblages of material, psychological and semantic components. In a Deleuzian framework, border harms and crimes are rethought as ways of capturing the libidinal act of crossing-the-border, an act of transgression, a line of flight that challenges and redefines existing social boundaries, de/materialised as borders.

Visual and sensory criminology’s exploration of the intersection of sensory inputs and affect in understanding crime can benefit from Deleuze’s understanding of body-sensory experience and affect/affection as expressions of the body’s worldly integrality. Deleuze suggests a non-linear, non-hierarchical model that reflects the interconnectedness of sensory experiences in studying crime. Crime, in this view, is seen as a collision of bodies’ libidinal capacities. This approach recognises that sensory experience is holistic, processual and contextual. This perspective is non-dualist and non-anthropocentric; it moves beyond representational and semiotic approaches, arguing that the world itself is affective, not just

our responses to it. It finally calls for sustained engagement with the affective politics of sensory control, the state-capitalist extraction of desire from bodies, understood as crucial political sites of regulation and resistance.

These conceptual sketches are ultimately critiques of the state-capitalist tendency to capture and harness desire. Deleuze, however, reminds us that there are risks in any emancipatory operation, including the ones that we have outlined here when talking about strategic political action. Cultivating becoming and desire may generate new fixed identities and hierarchies which create or perpetuate subjugation. Thus, a critical approach must not only reactivate lines of flight but also remain cognisant of the processes of recodification inherent in any libidinal dynamic. This ambivalence is foundational to Deleuze's thought, emphasising the need for self-critical caution in any attempt to disrupt or transform established identities, relations and systems, being methodologically suspicious of the new structures we create, even when we abolish something.

Along these lines, the ultimate political objective is not to outline an uncontaminated state of becoming but to promote a self-critical disentanglement from the interdependent structures of the state and capital, at the social-individual level. It is not surprising to say that these structures operate within criminology as well. Disentangling criminology from them will always be an endeavour fraught with limits, against the historical background of a 'science' that remains deeply administrative and state-parasitic, and at a time of emboldened macro- and micro-fascisms. It is therefore crucial to keep widening and deepening our analytical and political imagination—to keep *encountering*—rather than restricting it. As Deleuze iconically put it: 'There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons' (1992: 4).

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