CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.19

Science Without Conscience. Or How a Criminology Conference Bared the Discipline's Dead Soul

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I was looking forward to this year's EUROCRIM in Athens. Even for a reluctant conference-goer like me, there was much to look forward to. Meeting, supporting and reuniting with colleagues, making friends and basking in the lush Mediterranean sunshine are sources of (de)light, even in the shadow of global ecocide. It was another '-cide', however, that filled the air with downcast despair: the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the (Western) world's complicity in it (Albanese, 2024; Borrell, 2025). Arming, bankrolling, or providing ideological support for Israel's war crimes and crimes against humanity (Khan, 2024) loomed large as topics for discussion and featured in dedicated panels and working groups. Little did we know that the European Society of Criminology (ESC), which organises the EUROCRIM conference, would open its doors to Israeli universities that operate on occupied Palestinian territory, in violation of international law (Albanese, 2025; Academics for Palestine, n.d.; Wind, 2024).

It took Criminologists for Palestine and their supporters to act as the critical conscience that the ESC betrayed, in favour of stale clichés about "scientific exchange" vs. "political declarations" (ESC, 2025). Needless to say, trading in spurious notions of scientific neutrality/objectivity makes for bad science and even worse politics. Unless we believe in mythical "view[s] from nowhere" (Nagel, 1986) that deceive us into thinking that we can think our thoughts and live our lives as isolated individuals, quarantined on some imaginary neutral ground that is uncontaminated by the social and political world that we are otherwise educated and socialised into. This would require us to mistake political beings for lab animals and to forget that most criminologists are in fact social scientists, that is to say: scientists of the *social*—not the atomic, molecular, cellular, individual, or psychological realms of human life.

Alas, the ESC seems content with taking the 'social' out of social science, adopting an apolitical, asocial—and one might say 'antisocial' and amoral—position and refusing to side with, acknowledge, or apologise for what the conference's hosts (Panteion University *and* the Municipality of Athens) criticised it for: namely, "the legitim[isation of] policies which, under present circumstances, contribute to the perpetration of war crimes" (Panteion, 2025) and the lack of due regard for the "sensitivities affected" in the current "international context" (City of Athens, 2025). Other local academic societies (EEMEKE) and activist groups (BDS Greece) also appealed to the ESC's conscience, to no avail, criticising the Society's decision to peddle platitudes about "[s]cientific neutrality" which "in this case does not constitute respect for a different opinion, but "a state of denial, with enormous scientific and broader political consequences" (EEMEKE, 2025) and even declaring that "[i]f the ESC wants to remain the European Society of Criminology and not *Criminality*, it would do well to heed the demands of its membership to support the calls from Palestinians" (BDS, 2025).

In response, the ESC Board rejected accusations that blamed it for "legitimising war crimes in Palestine", lamented that it was "pressurised to institute a boycott of individual ESC members based on their country of origin and institutional affiliation" and "deeply regret[ted]" that "such campaigns have led Panteion University and the Municipality of Athens to revoke their involvement in EuroCrim 2025", claiming that there is "widespread misinformation circulating on social media about the ESC, its principles, and its practices" (ESC, 2025). What the ESC Board called "gross distortions" that "risk damaging the reputation of our Society and the integrity of its scholarly mission" (ESC, 2025), however, accurately describe how it conducted itself—even in the writing of the statement quoted above.

By choosing *not* to take sides in the midst of genocidal slaughter constitutes silent complicity. Have Board members not read Howard Becker's (1967) *Whose Side Are We On?* in their introductory criminology classes? Furthermore, taking a stand is neither unscientific nor unprofessional, unless the European Association of Social Anthropologists, the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology, the American Anthropological Association and several other educational bodies around the world (Davis, 2025) are unprofessional and unscientific. Boycotting Israeli academic institutions inevitably involves boycotting those who represent them, but the latter are not targeted as *individuals*. They are taken to task as representatives of and perhaps willing participants in the political function of universities that: (a) are located *illegally* in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (ICC, 2024), (b) remain directly involved in oppression against Palestinians by offering "degrees as a means of expanding Israeli sovereignty and advancing the annexation of the OPT" (Wind, 2024, p. 84) and (c) profit from scholasticide in Gaza (UN, 2024). All the above amount to a systematic boycott of Palestinian life, which in the eyes of the ESC must not count as a boycott at all.

It is equally remarkable that the ESC Board decided not to join forces with its local partners in Athens,

preferring instead to criticise them for criticising it—while also implying that the locals didn't arrive at their decisions independently, but were rather swayed by "campaigns" that are not even named (presumably, they are referring to BDS Greece and Criminologists for Palestine). That this smacks of a colonialist mentality that denies 'the natives' the ability to reason is obvious enough, as is the haughty dismissal of criticisms levelled against the ESC as "widespread misinformation". But what exactly is *not* true of the criticisms voiced above? What *are* the ESC's "principles and practices", at the present juncture, if not inaction, gaslighting and an arrogant dismissal of colleagues and ESC members who committed the terrible atrocity of calling the Society out?

I wonder what is "principled" about the ESC Board's elaborate hedging that gives off a superior air of neutrality, professionalism, respectability, nuance and calm while effectively casting doubt on the logic and veracity of those who challenged the ESC to actually defend the values it proclaims to uphold. Was it "principled" of the ESC Board to send a message to the conferees (at 9am on the 5th of September), informing us of "multiple documented reports of disruptions and harassment directed at Israeli participants during the conference", without bothering to check whether the same, if not worse, behaviour came from Israeli academics? I personally witnessed (a) the interruption of a conversation circle about academic complicity in genocide, (b) harassment of colleagues who distributed a motion to the ESC's General Assembly to end collaboration with Israeli academic institutions, (c) disruption of panels on the topic of Israel's genocide in Gaza that required the intervention of the Chair and (d) loud singing by Israeli academics who wanted to drown out the reading of statements that informed delegates of the role of Israeli universities in Palestinian oppression. And what exactly is "principled" about *denying* the ESC's own members a vote on a motion that called against "complicity in Israeli atrocity crimes", *despite* the overwhelming support for it by those present in the room—to say nothing of the 656 signatories of a petition that demands action from the ESC?

In response to the criticisms described above, the ESC Board would probably reply as it already did (on 31 August 2025)—insisting that: " [t]he Society's key contribution to challenging the atrocities happening in Gaza is to provide fora for rigorous scholarly debate, in academic and publicly accessible settings, thereby strengthening criminological knowledge and informing the public and policymakers, rather than boycotting individual members or issuing political declarations in the name of the entire ESC membership" (ESC, 2025). So there we have it! What is happening in Gaza is no wholescale genocide (Lemkin Institute, 2023). It can just be filed under "atrocities". As for the contribution of criminology, it *must* be limited to "scholarly debate". The ESC cannot take a stand, or speak truth to power, even if other professional associations do. They must be less democratic, or have weaker constitutions that ours. Besides, isn't criminology a science after all? Does it not suffice to calculate the square root of 'criminality' and leave politics to the politicians, the diplomats and the hot-headed agitators?

W.E.B Du Bois (2007, p. 34) *must* have been wrong when proclaiming that "one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved". Edward Said *must* be thought of as a lesser scholar and a renegade extremist who threw stones at an Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) guard tower (Sheehi, 2024). Violence can and should be condemned 'on both sides' even though one side has all the power and the other fights back for its own liberation from decades of settler colonial rule (Sayegh, 2012). Michael Burawoy *must* have been reprimanded for comparing Israel's "apartheid regime", in Ehud Barak's words (McCarthy, 2010), with South Africa and doing so at the European Sociological Association's conference. The ESC *must* be right in defending a (non-)stance of neutrality/objectivity and there is *nothing* political about that. But surely, we must also understand that remaining neutral and not taking a stand in the name of science *is* political—especially when doing so reproduces wrongdoing instead of exposing and opposing it, not just as sentient human beings but as soul-searching and truth-telling scholars too.

It may well be 'scientific' to claim that "scientists collaborated even with the Nazis" as a German Professor who is judged to be distinguished said during the General Assembly. But it is morally wrong. And while such crude criminological scientism may shock us, it should hardly surprise us. Michel Foucault, who reigns supreme as one of criminologists' most admired theorists, bared the discipline's dead soul fifty years ago—expressing his astonishment at its "garrulous discourse"; wondering how "it has been able to go on at this level" and reminding us of criminology's "entirely utilitarian" character that is "so vital for the working of the system". Despite the *grand penseur's* own pro-Israeli sentiments (Said, 2000), I would like to think that he would have probably balked at the ESC Board's logic "out of astonishment", not

"aggressiveness" (Foucault, 1977, p. 47). For their brand of criminology is not just science. It is science without conscience.

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How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):
Fatsis, L. (2025). Science Without Conscience. Or How a Criminology Conference Bared the Discipline's Dead Soul. *Criminological Encounters.* 7(1). 203-208. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.19

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