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Customs at a Distance and Abstract Police: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives on Customs Risk Management

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In today's globalized world, national customs agencies face expanding responsibilities that extend far beyond their traditional role as revenue collectors. Increasingly, customs are made responsible of securing society from harmful threats, while recent trade developments place additional pressure on customs to minimize disruptions to the supply chain. Belgian customs authorities now operate within this delicate balance, utilizing advanced risk management techniques to address security concerns while facilitating trade. This paper explores how Belgian customs have embraced data-driven methods to enhance their customs control practices, moving towards a model of 'customs at a distance' and 'abstract police' as described in literature. Drawing on empirical data, including semi-structured interviews and fieldnotes, this paper examines the experiences of Belgian customs officers with risk management through these fundamental perspectives, analyzing the challenges posed by these transformed customs practices, including their implications on knowledge, autonomy, and inter-organizational relations within the customs administration. Through this analysis, the study provides valuable insights into the risk practices of customs, underscoring their key role in today's security environment. In an era of accelerating global trade and increasingly sophisticated criminal networks, customs authorities remain on the frontline, adapting their practices to meet the demands of a rapidly changing security landscape.

Keywords: Customs, risk management, customs at a distance, abstract police, Belgium.

1. Introduction

Risk management has acclaimed a vital role within the customs activities (Karklina-Admine et al. 2024). The increasing flow of goods, in combination with the broadened mandate of customs to protect the security, health and safety of society have urged authorities across the globe to integrate risk management techniques and the use of information technology into their organization, 'as solutions that marry security concerns and trade facilitation' (Commission of the European Communities 2003, 5). As a result, the customs scholarship has gathered a broad collection of studies focusing on automatization, digitalization, information systems and machine learning (see for example Heijmann et al. 2020; Li and Sun 2005; Vorona et al. 2022), in the areas of decision-making (Boikova et al. 2022), risk profiles (Chermiti 2019) and the detection of security risks (Vanhoeyveld, Martens, and Peeters 2020).

While most research on these topics are approached from perspectives like computer sciences, engineering, statistics and econometry, providing mostly technical analyses regarding the improvement of data mining techniques, classification algorithms, data quality and the search for outliers (Mikuriya and Cantens 2020), other domains like criminology, border studies, anthropology, risk science and (political) geography have explored similar subjects, often from a more fundamental point of view, see for example the work of Amoore (2013) on the preemptive thinking in risk governance by incorporating uncertainty into decision making or the theoretical framework worked out by Zarghooni-Hoffmann and Aven (2024) in view of intelligence assessment. One of the most influential theoretical contributions in regards to customs risk management is the works of Chalfin (2007) and Côté-Boucher (2014, 2020) on the concept of 'customs at a distance', describing the

changed spatio-temporal dynamics of customs' controls, that increasingly take place long before goods arrive at the border. These ideas strongly reflect the notions of intelligence-led policing, focusing on crime analysis, intelligence and IT technologies, with recent reflections describing the move towards an 'abstract police' as a result of these information technology-driven developments (Terpstra, Fyfe, and Salet 2019; Terpstra, Salet, and Fyfe 2022).

While these theoretical contributions are highly relevant to the study of customs, particularly in the context of risk management, there remains a notable gap in academic research that synthesizes these diverse perspectives. Integrating these ideas could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex changes shaping customs practices today. Indeed, the field of customs remains an underexplored area, necessitating further (empirical) insights into how fundamental concepts are understood and operationalized in everyday border security practices (Côté-Boucher 2014; Côté-Boucher et al. 2014). This article seeks to address this knowledge gap. By combining the theoretical frameworks of 'customs at a distance' and 'abstract police' with empirical fieldwork conducted within the Belgian customs administration, it examines the lived realities of risk management practices. Specifically, the study explores how customs officers perceive and navigate the risk management environment and how these experiences align with these existing theoretical understandings.

2. Theoretical Background

This article draws on two theoretical concepts: 'customs at a distance' (CAD) and the 'abstract police' (AP). By combining both perspectives, a comprehensive theoretical framework is created to guide the empirical research. The two concepts originate from distinct academic disciplines—anthropology and border studies in the case of CAD, and policing scholarship for AP—and are rooted in different contexts, with CAD focusing on customs environments and AP on traditional police organizations. However, they share significant common ground. Both are grounded in the observation that significant changes have occurred within the customs/police organizations. These changes have been driven by the integration of modern technologies, electronic documentation and systematic approaches designed to adapt to changing environments and to enhance effectiveness. As for the CAD concept, Chalfin (2007) explains that the coexisting paradigms of facilitation and security has necessitated the use for pre-arrival information to address customs' dual mandate. With the arrival of pre-arrival notification and electronic declarations, customs officers can assess potential risks and decide to detain, reject or inspect cargo prior to the arrival of goods arrived at the border. This development, as Chalfin notes, 'extends customs' authority outward in time and space…, moving beyond the territory of the nation-state even as customs officers remain within it' (Chalfin 2007, 1616). Similarly, the idea of abstract police emerged from critical reflections on police reforms in Western Europe. These reforms aimed to improve organizational effectiveness by increasing reliance on IT, databases, crime analysis and intelligence. However, Terpstra, Fyfe, and Salet (2019; Terpstra, Salet, and Fyfe 2022) point out that these reforms have led to unintended consequences, stating that 'the police have become more at a distance, more impersonal and formal, less direct and more decontextualized'(Terpstra, Fyfe, and Salet 2019, 340).

Although the CAD concept emphasizes temporal and spatial distance, and AP focuses on inter-relational distance, both frameworks address similar dynamics that have emerged from these respective organizational transformations.

A first element that is identified within both the CAD and the AP context revolves around the personal knowledge of first-line officers. According to Terpstra et al. (2019, 2022), one

manifestation of the 'abstract police' is the diminishing significance of local and personal knowledge held by officers in the field, resulting from an increased reliance on system-based risk assessment and management. This shift relocates the contextual understanding of operational police work from frontline officers to those engaged in data analysis (Henry and Fyfe 2022). Much in the same sense, Côté-Boucher (2014) discusses the *déqualification* of customs work, where the practical knowledge of customs agents, like regional economic and criminal dynamics, is considered subordinate to risk analysis, encouraging a certain deskilling of first-line officers, who become mere executors of inspections that are required by specialists elsewhere in or outside the border space.

Secondly, and related to this aspect of personal and local knowledge, are the changing responsibilities that have come with the risk management developments. Within the idea of CAD, a significant part of the customs decision has been removed from front-line officers to higher levels of the organization. This, as Côté-Boucher (2014) argues, diminishes the effectiveness of customs officers' powers, which traditionally belonged to the operational customs work at the border. The same issue is raised in the issue of abstract police, where the dependence on digital services and systems has caused a shift from street-level bureaucracy to system-level bureaucracy, strongly influencing the discretion of individual officers which have been made dependent on system information (Terpstra, Fyfe, and Salet 2019; Terpstra, Salet, and Fyfe 2022).

Lastly, both CAD and AP highlight how the integration of IT and other digital systems has influenced the relationships between officers. Within the CAD concept, Côté-Boucher (2014) has argued that while instead of enhancing efficiency, the incorporation of technology in customs work has revealed internal rivalries between field workers and middle managers. In the AP literature, these tensions and conflicts between operational and intelligence officers is explained by the increased distance between local and centralized departments, and the sometimes-lacking understanding within these central departments regarding the problems and priorities of the local contexts (Terpstra, Salet, and Fyfe 2022).

3. Methodology

This article is part of a larger doctoral research project that seeks to explore the security provision by the Belgian customs administration. The study adopts a qualitative approach, consisting of two forms of data collection. First, three months of fieldwork was conducted at the Belgian General Administration of Customs and Excise. The fieldwork consisted of observations, introductory conversations and guided tours at all the central and regional customs departments across the country and involved excessive interaction with the field, as more than 70 Belgian customs officers were engaged throughout the field visits. The fieldwork was especially useful to get a comprehensive understanding of the customs organization, the activities and procedures carried out by customs officers, as well as the techniques and powers employed.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were carried out with various policing actors, both within and outside the field of customs. In total, 39 respondents participated across various fields of expertise, including police departments, private industry stakeholders, national and international experts, and European institutions. The scope of these interviews varied based on the respondents' backgrounds, expertise, and current roles. However, they generally focused on their perspectives and experiences with key security challenges—undervaluation fraud, drug trafficking, and illicit tobacco trade. Particular attention was given to the legal, functional, organizational, and spatial dimensions of customs operations, as well as the broader mandates that shape their enforcement efforts.

4. Findings

In the European Union (EU), customs' risk management is regulated in article 46 of the Union Customs Code (UCC). In this section of the UCC, the general principles of the customs risk management practice are described. For instance, the article dictates that customs controls should be primarily based on risk analysis through the use of technological techniques that identify and evaluate the risks on the basis of criteria. Furthermore, customs risk management is expected to make a differentiation between levels of risks to organize and prioritize customs controls. In Belgium, Paperless Customs and Excise (PLDA) was introduced in 2007.[a] This system made it possible to present all declarations electronically and, as such, plays a vital role in the risk management process of the Belgian customs. This transition towards an electronic customs has caused a significant change in the work of customs officers, or as one respondent put it 'Everything began with the move to electronic customs. […] This was an important step. It didn't exist before, but now it is actually the nervous system of customs' (R2).

During my fieldwork, I became familiar with the different departments responsible for risk management. In short, at the central department of risk management in Brussels, risk analyses are carried out for the entire territory and translated to risk profiles. Hits in the system are sent to the different regions, where a control team further refines the proposed customs control, which are then scheduled by the control room.

After this process, the selected goods are inspected by first-line officers. These officers thus represent the operational endpoint of an increasingly automated system of risk assessment and analysis, which passes through multiple departments before being assigned to the actual officers in the field. This marks a stark contrast from earlier practices, before the arrival of such data-based risk management. As many customs officers recounted during my visits, customs controls were previously the sole responsibility of the first-line officers. They managed every element of the control process, meaning that the selection of goods, decisions on timing and location, and the actual documentary of physical inspections were all part of the officer's day-to-day operation. With the arrival of the risk management system as described above, much of these functions – selection and planning in particular – were removed from the purview of first-lice offices and distributed across various departments at regional and central levels. Thus, the entire customs control process became fragmentated: the officer who carries out the control is not the officer who schedules the control, and the officer who schedules the control is not the officer that selects the goods to be controlled.

During a visit at the control room, an officer demonstrated the system used to organize schedules for first-line officers, considering available capacity for the various inspections required. The officer emphasized that control room staff typically avoid examining the risk profiles associated with the selections, except when absolutely necessary.[b]

4.1. *Loss of autonomy and knowledge?*

As illustrated by one of my fieldnotes, the dispersion of responsibilities described in the CAD and AP theories is clearly evident within the Belgian customs administration, as a substantial portion of decision-making now lies outside the purview of operational officers in the field. These developments have led some Belgian customs officers to express concerns about the loss of

[a] Ministerial Decree of 26 March 2007 amending the Ministerial Decree of July 22, 1998 on customs and excise declarations, *BS* 13 April 2007.

[b] Fieldnotes, week 14 November 2022

autonomy, and the diminishing value of their local knowledge.

One officer reflected on this shift, stating: *"We have lost our touch. In the past a customs officer was allowed to make his own selection. […] Europe says that is no longer allowed. […]. So, the first-line service performs what the computer says. But we don't necessarily have that touch with the field anymore. "(*R9)

Interestingly, when discussing the organization of customs controls with a regional director (i.e. the head of one of the seven customs regions), a similar account was provided: *"Customs officers used to do everything from selection, to planning and conducting the verification. All based on their experience. […]. Now everything is separated. Some customs officers are not comfortable with that and feel that their expertise cannot be used now. They have a feeling as if they are hanging by a thread […]. And goods that they sense are not right, or possibly pose certain risks are no longer allowed to inspect if it is not planned as such for them."*[c]

These accounts align strongly with the theoretical background, which described the decreasing reliance on personal and local knowledge as well as the profound changes in customs decision-making brought by risk management processes.

However, the empirical findings also point towards some nuances in these areas. First, with regards to the erosion of local and personal knowledge in the risk management system, it is important to highlight the role of regional control teams. As a local branch of the central risk management department, these teams appear to be a way for the customs administration to incorporate local expertise into the selections from the central department. As one officer at a regional control team explained to me during my fieldwork: it is good to be on first line as [regional control team]. Because this allows you to know the field and the people well, and the way of working and controlling.[d] Furthermore, while the local knowledge of customs officers regarding the trade and business context of their region may be less at play in their current day-to-day job, this does not imply that customs controls with the arrival of risk management has become a less complicated task. On the contrary, many customs officers I talked to, from first-line staff to high-level management, described the first-line customs controls as being one of the most difficult jobs in the entire administration. This complexity arises from the expanding scope of customs responsibilities, particularly in the domains of security, health and safety. Customs officers are now expected to identify and manage a vast array of risks that extend far beyond customs-related matters. As one officer noted: "*As a first-line officer you need to know a lot, and the legislation changes all the time. Every six months something new comes along, and there are always different crises to deal with (COVID...). Which means the job is not for everyone*."[e] This view is shared with a respondent working at the central department: '*I must say our people are very resilient, to put it in a modern word, they are extremely adaptable, because we have been overwhelmed with these Russia sanctions. Yes, and I think we actually do that quite well as an organization. We look at our people and they always just keep going, even though they also don't know what the day is going to bring. We always say, in a manner of speaking: the beginning of the nomenclature is a donkey, the end are cultural objects. Well, those people move between that donkey and that painting. And all day long, they have to maneuver through all that legislation, while seeing that the import duties are correctly applied, the preferences, anti-dumping…'* (R4)

Secondly, the fieldwork revealed important nuances to the perceived loss of autonomy among officers in the field. While respondents

[c] Fieldnotes, week 24 October 2022
[d] Fieldnotes, 13 Mai 2024
[e] Fieldnotes, 13 Mai 2024

acknowledged that the risk management system has reduced their discretionary powers in deciding what, when and where to inspect – reinforcing the idea of being executors of what the computer tells them to do – they also recognized the benefits of distributing customs decision-making across different departments. In particular, several customs officers highlighted the role of the risk management system as a kind of anti-corruption measurement. They explained that dividing key aspects of customs controls – such as selection, planning and execution of controls – across different departments within the hierarchical structure of the Belgian customs administration, significantly limits opportunities for criminal organizations to corrupt customs officers. One respondent articulated this perspective as follows:

"If you look at the drug trade. You can approach customs officers, but because they actually have little power, you are not able to do that anymore. So, what are the most corruption sensitive services? That is selection. […] We are directed by the computer. I have no view on what my people do. But my employee gets directions from the control room: that's the container that you have to control. So, for a gang to go say okay, I want to go corrupt customs, they must bribe the entire verification process. So, [risk management] has its advantages, it has its disadvantages." (R9)

4.2.*Changed inter-organizational relations?*

Lastly, this section examines the empirical evidence concerning the impact of the risk management system on inter-organizational relations. As discussed in the theoretical background, both the CAD and AP frameworks highlight the tensions that can arise between first-line officers, who execute the controls, and the centralized department, which develops the risk analysis models and generates the selections of the risky goods. These tensions are largely a result of the distance – both physical and relational – between these departments of the customs administration. In Belgium, this distance is tangible in two ways. First, there is the physical separation, with the central department being located in Brussels, the capital, while first-line offices are stationed at the borders and in other regional areas, often far away from the capital. Second, the distance is evident in communication practices, which are predominantly system-based. First-line officers provide insights on the outcomes of a control to the central department through a feedback system. The risk management department then uses these insights to refine and adapt their risk analyses and profiles.

The fieldwork points towards some tensions related to this communication process. Central department officials reported that the feedback provided by first-line officers is sometimes insufficient, lacking the detailed context necessary to evaluate whether the current risk profiles are effective. They emphasized the need for comprehensive feedback that not only clarifies whether goods conform to particular legislative requirements or not, but also explains why a selected good was or was not compliant, since contradictory or incomplete feedback from first-line officers can undermine the accuracy of the risk models.[f]

The other way around, first line officers expressed frustration over the lack of clarity on why certain goods are selected for inspection. Additionally, they face significant time constraints during the customs controls. Officers only get a certain amount of time to execute a control from the control room. This time includes driving to the right location and finding the goods of the selected declaration. These pressures can limit the extent of their control activities and the depth of the feedback they provide. The current risk management model also consists of three different kinds of feedback mechanisms (based on the sort of declaration), further complicating the

[f] Fieldnotes, week 03 October 2022

ties between first line officers and the central departments. Accordingly, the communication process is primarily indirect and impersonal, relying on the completion of feedback forms submitted to the central department. This aligns with AP's notion of increasingly distant and indirect interactions within organizations.

As a consequence, some central officers have expressed concern about the lack of connections with the field, noting that the feedback system alone does not adequately capture the challenges faced by officers in the field when carrying out their selections.[g]Informal contacts outside the normal and formal communication channels appear to be a particular important way to bridge the distance between the different departments, as one central officer explains:

"*Sometimes risk experts get in contact with first-line officers through the preparation for large-scale actions, for example. This is a good way of getting to know these officers in a more informal way than through the usual channels. These interactions are important because they allow both parties to better understand each other's roles and challenges. They help grasp the difficulties first-line officers experience, particularly in terms of timing and practical arrangements for customs controls. It also provides a clearer picture of the administrative work associated with the feedback system."* [h]

5. Conclusions

This article explored the experiences of the Belgian customs administration with customs risk management, employing theoretical perspectives from border studies and criminology. By approaching empirical insights through these fundamental lenses, the study contributes to current scholarship on customs by deepening the empirical understanding of customs risk management and refining the theoretical concepts of customs at a distance (CAD) and abstract policing (AP).

The CAD and AP frameworks offer valuable tools for analyzing how risk management has redistributed decision-making processes – such as the selection of goods and planning of controls – from operational officers to higher organizational levels. This shift has altered customs officers' work, particularly in terms of knowledge, autonomy, and inter-organizational relations, as they operate within an increasingly system-driven environment.

Empirical findings also bring nuances to the theoretical frameworks. While CAD and AP emphasize the erosion of local knowledge and the challenges posed by reliance on IT systems, this study shows how technical expertise has replaced personal knowledge as a critical asset at the local level, and how the risk management approach acts as an anti-corruption measure. Additionally, the study reveals how formalized feedback systems are a way of understanding the distance between first-line officers and central departments, shedding light on the organizational tensions arising from this divide.

These insights enhance our understanding of how risk management reshapes customs organizations, their operations, and internal dynamics.

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[g] Fieldnotes, week 03 October 2022

[h] Fieldnotes, week 03 October 2022

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