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**Roos Pijpers**

**“Help! The Poles are Coming”**  
(narrating a contemporary moral panic)



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**“Help! The Poles are coming”  
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Roos Pijpers  
PhD-student  
Nijmegen Centre for Border Research  
Department of Human Geography  
Nijmegen University  
The Netherlands

Phone: 0031-24-3616123  
Fax: 0031-24-3611841  
E-mail: [r.pijpers@nsm.kun.nl](mailto:r.pijpers@nsm.kun.nl)

ABSTRACT. Closely following timely developments with regard to the European unification process, this paper focuses on recent migration policies taken with regard to labour immigrants from new EU member states. In the course of the May 2004 enlargement round, many ‘old’ member states decided to either delay free movement with a number of years or restrict it by limiting labour market access. It is argued that these policies are deeply grounded in ‘fear’; fear of mass migration as such, as well as fear of the immigrants’ impact on domestic employment, housing markets and social welfare systems. To this purpose, the paper starts with the elaboration of a theoretical framework around the concept of ‘moral panic’, drawn from the sociology of deviance, which is embedded in literature on boundary drawing and socio-spatial exclusion of immigrants as unwanted ‘strangers’. By means of a narrative analysis of the free movement policy issue as it has unfolded in the Netherlands, it is subsequently demonstrated that ‘fear of mass migration’ has indeed played an important role in the ‘bordering’ of immigrant workers from new member states. Where appropriate, the narrative’s results are placed within a wider context of migration and EU enlargement.

## **“Help! The Poles are coming<sup>1</sup>”** **(narrating a contemporary moral panic)**

It is widely acknowledged that this is the age of moral panic.

*Kenneth Thompson, 1998, p. 1*

### **1 Introduction**

April 16th, 2003, can be regarded as an historic date in the process of European unification. This day witnessed the signing of the Treaty of Athens, in which the accession of ten new member states into the European Union was laid down. In the course of that same year, the ratification of this Treaty led to fierce discussion in parliaments in present member states over some of the possible (negative) consequences of enlargement, among which for example food safety, crime and human trafficking. The focus of this paper is on yet another of these issues, and a highly controversial one indeed: labour immigration. Having devoted many years to preparation for the *acquis communautaire* and the absorption of the Structural Funds, accession countries were expecting to be granted the four freedoms of movement (goods, services, capital and labour) upon accession. In rapid succession however, the national governments of Germany, Austria and France closed their borders to labour immigrants from newly associated member states for a period of at least five years, and possibly seven. Spain, Belgium and Finland decided not to allow immigrant workers from new member countries into their domestic labour market until 2006. A third group of countries, consisting of Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain and Norway (non-EU) will exact strict entrance conditions upon employees from new member states, although the labour market itself will not be closed. It may come as no surprise then, that when the ratification of the Athens Treaty was discussed in the Netherlands, several Members of Parliament expressed their concern over a possible inflow from, in most cases, low-rated workers from countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic. The political and public discussion that followed finally resulted in a decision to admit this particular group of migrants only in specific sectors of the economy, wherein labour shortages are considered to be structural and not to be fulfilled by Dutch workers. In principle though, the Dutch labour market will be closed until 2006, therewith effectively “bordering migration” as well.

This paper examines the course of events that led the Dutch government to make this decision. The five-month period in which the issue of potential mass migration from new member states featured in the media will serve as a case study for this purpose. The perceived threat that the immigrant workers bring along, apart from their arrival in considerable numbers also their impact on labour markets, housing markets and social welfare systems is analysed by means of a narrative. This implies an in-depth case study description of reports of debates, factual data and media coverage on this topic. The idea behind this exercise is to examine to which extent the

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<sup>1</sup> Provocative title of a television documentary broadcast on September 29, 2003, made by journalist Arthur van Amerongen and filmmaker Gilles Frenken.

“fear of mass migration” narrative matches a theoretical framework developed around the sociological concept of “moral panic”. An introduction to this fascinating concept is presented in section 2, as well as its relevance in a wider geographical context of bordering (and ordering) (European Union) space. Section 3 discusses the latest insights into the study of moral panics and social anxieties in an age of (supposed) unbounded mobility. References are made to the current state of economic slowdown and its implications for fear of mass migration. Methodological notes are presented in section 4, focussing on media and narrative analysis. The actual narrative is carried out in section 5, starting with a brief introduction to current immigration and integration issues in the Netherlands. This section subsequently offers a detailed chronological analysis of the events occurring from September 2003 until February 2004, when the Dutch government announced its decision to restrict free movement. The final part of section 5 draws the threads together and discusses the narratives’ implications for related cases of fear of mass migration. The paper is concluded in section 6.

## **2 “The age of the moral panic”**

### **2.1 Original thoughts**

Finding its roots in the sociology of deviance, the concept of moral panic was introduced by British sociologist Stanley Cohen in the 1970s. Since every subsequent publication on moral panics refers to Cohen, and because it would be impossible to present an exhaustive overview of all of the writings on this particular topic for the scope of this article, I will confine myself with a short recollection here. In his seminal work “Folk devils and moral panics” of 1972 (reprinted in 1980), Cohen extensively elaborates on an otherwise relatively insignificant uproar between two groups of youngsters, called the “Mods” and the “Rockers”, the names referring to associated lifestyles of modernist and fashionable versus anarchistic and provocative. The event nevertheless caught the attention of a wider public through media exposure and the involvement of experts on youth culture expressing their concerns over the uproar’s moral implications for Britain as a whole, and was subsequently blown completely out of proportion by various mass media. However, the anxiety that seized the nation did not last very long, and faded away again rather quickly with the emergence of other fears. For a more detailed summary of the Mods and Rockers narrative as well as in-depth analyses of this classic case of moral panics, see Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), Thompson (1998) and Critcher (2003).

The reason for naming some discomfoting developments in society a moral panic and others not is threefold (Thompson, 1998 and Snel, 2003). The difference with acknowledged social problems such as unemployment and social segregation is that moral panics are perceived to be a threat to the moral order in society itself – or an “ideological conception of some part of it” (Thompson, 1998, p.8). Secondly, a moral panic is initiated by someone who sees the moral order being challenged. Those calling attention to a particular threat are called “moral entrepreneurs” (Cohen, 1972/1980) or, in a slightly broader definition, “claims makers” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). A third characteristic which makes a moral panic is the presence of a person or

group of persons exhibiting behaviour different from which society considers normal. These people, deviants therefore, are called “folk devils”:

“In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be.”

(Cohen, 1972/1980, p. 10)

In his book, Cohen develops a *processual* model of the “deviance amplification” of moral panics, which is characterised by a number of subsequent stages, starting with an initial, triggering event which society perceives as problematic (Cohen, 1972/1980 and Thompson, 1998). The model then proceeds to stages of societal “shock” reaction followed by the establishment of sanctioning control systems. When the panic fades away, a stage has been reached wherein those considered deviant are confirmed as stereotypes (see for a detailed description Cohen, 1972/1980 and Thomson, 1998). Although widely acknowledged to be the first model capturing the broad notion of social anxiety into a more or less demarcated concept, Cohen’s work has been criticised for its lack of preciseness still. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), who provide an overall academic deepening of the concept of moral panic, have attempted to fill out this “gap” by devote an important part of their book to renewing and adding criteria to the concept of moral panics. Apart from 1) concern (over a perceived threat), 2) hostility (towards those causing it), 3) consensus (about the need for a solution) and 4) volatility (of the panic’s intensity in time), the most important criterion they attach is that of disproportionality. A social problem is a moral panic only then, they argue, when the general and media attention it receives surpasses the real, objective threat it poses to society by far. In this respect, it should be possible to produce factual evidence in the form of, for instance, numerical data of supposed negative consequences, which implies that most moral panics can be identified only, and sometimes long, afterwards. Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s work has become known as the *attributional* model of moral panics (see for a detailed description Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994 and Critcher, 2003).

An important contribution made by Goode and Ben-Yehuda is that they succeed in embedding the discussion about moral panics in a wider epistemological debate between objectivists and social constructionists. Each other’s opposites, objectivists argue that quantification of a supposed threat would give a solution to the question whether it is possible to speak of a true moral panic or not, whereas the constructionist view states that every form of anxiety in society is by definition socially constructed and therefore immeasurable. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) propose a more moderate variant of social constructionism, which they call “contextual constructionism”. Although contextual constructionists subscribe the idea that moral panics represent a sensed rather than a real threat, they do attempt to verify (or falsify) their perceptions by producing data and reconstructing chronological events when elaborating their case study (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Although no such quantification is presented in this paper, I will follow the contextual constructionist approach by assuming that EU-enlargement and forthcoming east-west migrations are realities to be awaited, and not merely inventions of terrified and endlessly irrational politicians.

## 2.2 Enforcing moral boundaries

Threatening society's moral order, moral panics first of all challenge the invisible lines wrapped around that order, protecting it like membrane around cells. With some sense of imagination, these lines can be called society's moral boundaries, a metaphor which has been used many times by moral panic and social exclusion researchers:

“In fact, it is entirely likely that moral panics serve as a mechanism for simultaneously strengthening and redrawing society's moral boundaries – that line between morality and immorality, just where one leaves the territory of good and enters that of evil. When a society's moral boundaries are sharp, clear, and secure, and the central norms and values are strongly held by nearly everyone, moral panics rarely grip its members – nor do they need to. However, when the moral boundaries are fuzzy and shifting and often seem to be contested, moral panics are far more likely to seize the members of a society.”

(Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 52)

Strangely enough, moral boundaries are defined and made visible only when threatened by some outside force(s). Norms and values, embedded in society's history and maintained in silent consent, are stirred up and brought up for discussion. Often, outsiders are considered incompatible with these norms and values which in turn may lead to stereotyping, assuming them to pursue specific agenda's (stealing “our” jobs) and ways of behaviour, as Cohen implied. A whole spectrum of terminology is used to identify such outside forces, both in academic and in policy literature. Touching upon the related notion of mental borders, geography points at differentiating “Us” versus “Them” rhetoric, the unknown Other, or the offending Other (Sibley, 1995). National and supranational policy documentation names outsiders strangers, aliens even. In fact, an increasingly large stream of literature is devoted to the “philosophy of strangers” within social theory (Diken, 1998, Van Houtum, 2003, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002, Hier, 2003).

Continuous moral boundary enforcement may find application in (combined) political, economic as well as socio-cultural space, therewith providing the moral panic concept with a clear territorial dimension. This dimension has been made explicit by Sibley (1995):

“Often, but not invariably, panics concern contested spaces, liminal zones which hostile communities intend on eliminating by appropriating such spaces for themselves and excluding the offending ‘other’.”

(Sibley, 1995, pp. 39-40)

Eager to keep the fragile order secure, control mechanisms are installed and enforced upon the strangers perceived to cause a threat, either excluding them from a territory or restricting their freedom of movements once inside. In that sense, guarding moral boundaries may result in a re-erecting of national borders, or of the access into some parts and/or segments of the nation state or the national economy (for instance a labour market). The enforcement of moral boundaries

may thus result in strategies of protecting a place from distorting outside influence. This influence is considered as “abject”, as unfitting into the moral order (Sibley, 1998). Consequently, being about norms and values, moral panics also involve issues of inclusion and exclusion, stereotypes and identity. Most moral panics seem to culminate into an establishment or alteration of some control mechanism; a law, a rule, a regulation. After measures have been taken, most panics fade away again. Most moral panics thus are of a temporal nature as they: “... heighten boundary consciousness but ... are, by definition, episodic. Fears die down and people subsequently rub along with each other” (Sibley, 1995). It so may occur that society considers the action(s) undertaken as appropriate or sufficient, or, alternatively, that a perceived threat does not become manifest in reality. Another reason could simply be that new threats emerge, which are considered to challenge moral boundaries even more.

In a timeframe of globalisation and mobility, a dichotomy seems to have emerged between, on the one hand, those who consider almost everything as fluid and liquid (s.f. Bauman, 2000), implying a decreased or even nullified importance of determinants of spatial fixity such as boundaries. Others (s.f. Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer, 2004) argue that, on the other hand, borderless spaces of flows with seemingly endless opportunities of personal and mutual gain might go accompanied by considerable, sometimes overwhelming feelings of uncertainty. This uncertainty, or uncontrollability, in turn induces powerful strategic actors to reclaim space where they still are able to. Claiming and reclaiming of space occurs through territorial ordering and bordering processes aiming to prevent undesired, fear-enhancing strangers from entering a particular bounded space. A realistic consequence of policies and practices of this kind might be good old-fashioned spatial purification (Sibley, 1995). In geo-political terms, such socio-spatial bordering strategies can be labelled “neo-conservative”, referring to the re-emerging desire to safeguard a place from what is new by enforcing spatial and moral boundaries (Van Houtum, Kramsch and Zierhofer, 2004).

### **3 Recent academic discussions**

#### **3.1 Changing versus converging sites of social anxiety**

Recent academic discussions have both challenged the concept of moral panic as such and made attempts to adapt it to contemporary research into social anxieties and the sociology of deviance in general. A time wherein diversity rather than homogeneity predominates and wherein everyday life’s securities are threatened by a multitude of hazards which may emerge in any place and at any time, society’s moral boundaries are increasingly challenged and blurred. In the words of Goode and Ben-Yehuda:

“Moral panics are likely to ‘clarify [the] normative contours’ and ‘moral boundaries’ of the society in which they occur, demonstrat[ing] that there are limits to how much diversity can be tolerated in a society.”

(Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 29, text in brackets added)

This development has been assessed by Ungar (2001), who states that at the time of Cohen's Mods and Rockers, moral panics emerged (and faded away again) in a dominant discourse of safety. Identifying folk devils and the supposed threat they caused used to be relatively easy, and so was the establishment of effective control systems to counterbalance their influence. Because contemporary fears about, for instance, nuclear disasters and terrorism are far more difficult to foresee and control, moral panics now emerge in a dominant discourse of "risk society" (Ungar, 2001). This new conceptualisation of social anxiety (as opposed to moral panics) is connected to the enduring state of many of these contemporary dangers, caused by irreversible global developments such as industrialisation and technological progress (Hier, 2003). Ungar reproaches traditional moral panics literature to be exclusively concerned with finding scientific proofs of disproportionality and identifying folk devils, personifications of "who we should not be" (Cohen, 1972/1980). As the Mods and Rockers case illustrates, classic moral panics tended to emerge in localised settings, thereby constituting "limited spatial and temporal threats" (Hier, 2003). Nowadays, Ungar argues, issues of a global scale are a far more important cause of social anxiety; nuclear and other environmental threats, epidemic diseases such as SARS, and so on. These phenomena, obviously, lack a clearly defined folk devil, which renders them very difficult to seize and therefore, they are perhaps even more reason for concern. Moreover, the diffuse character of contemporary social anxieties generates new types of folk devils; governments, companies, even multiple institutions at the same time (Ungar, 2001).

Hier (2003) offers an alternative evaluation of the value of the traditional moral panics concept in what sociologists call "late modernity". Whereas Ungar regards moral panics and risk society as fundamentally different and incompatible, Hier argues that although the concept indeed calls for a re-interpretation, sites of social anxiety are converging instead of diverging. It is true that (almost) no-one escapes awareness of globalisation through the influence of the (mass) media, but this awareness has to be separated from the enduring importance of the immediate (socio-spatial) environment: "peoples' perceptions of risk are situated within the context of routinised and normalised local order and the production and functioning of everyday living" (Hier, 2003). The risk society is mediated, but not necessarily lived. The importance of the normalised local, done away by Ungar, still holds in Hier's view. Regardless of spatial scale, "moral panics articulate beliefs about belonging and not belonging, about the sanctity of territory and the fear of transgression" (Sibley, 1995). The "quest" for order is situated in a struggle against the unforeseen, the unexpected (Hier, 2003). "In an ordered community, the vulnerable individual finds security. This security can only be maintained through the establishment and enforcement of control systems, securing the bounded community from which the enemy-like stranger is to be excluded" (Hier, 2003).

Against this background of new sites of social anxiety and uncertainty over whether they can or cannot be compared to original forms of moral panic, the question arises if these new concerns can be related to more "mundane" circumstances such as economic slowdown. Sibley is rather clear about this:

“One of the most remarkable features of moral panics is their recurrence in different guises with no obvious connection with economic crises or periods of social upheaval, as if societies frequently need to define their boundaries.”

(Sibley, 1995, pp. 39, 40)

To me, it is arguable whether this statement (still) holds. It so seems that the current state of economic slowdown, having western Europe in its grasp, is perceived and lived more intensely than previous recessions. This might be due to the widespread disappointment after years of sheer endless optimism about the “new” economy, often propagating the end of cyclical movements characterising the upward trend of economic development and the beginning of a linear upward trend. The burst of the overheated internet bubble was all too soon followed by the 9/11 events and their panicky immediate aftermath over terrorism and nuclear threats. With regard to external border management of the European Union, for instance, fears of enhanced crime brought about by illegal immigrants are often mentioned (e.g. Anderson and Bort, 2001, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002, Mitsilegas, 2002). Especially when labour immigration is considered, I would advocate the standpoint that economic crises do influence concerns and fears of mass inflows of migrant workers. Decreased (job) security implies a greater concern over job competition, which is only reinforced by the potential presence on the labour market of outsiders who are able and willing to accept more jobs for lower wages. This concern, set in the mind of the risk-avoiding economic agent, calls for appropriate and effective measures. Open borders can be closed, competitive labour markets shut down. In this respect, a connection can be made with the idea of “counter-modernity” (Hier, 2003). This concept, raised by risk-sociologist Ulrich Beck, aims to capture this desire to reintroduce security and therewith order in a risk society, if necessary by constructing scapegoats and folk devils out of, most notably, strangers. In the end, moral panic in a risk society is nothing more than an excuse for reintroducing order at both the individual and the state level (Hier, 2003).

### **3.2 Towards an enhanced processual model**

Empirically, ideas about the role of the general public have changed as well. Both Cohen (1972/1980) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) advocated the idea that the general public is the main claims maker in society. The “vox populi” is said to shed light on what fears and concerns are made use of (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Critcher (2003) does not share this view, as he, in his case studies, finds that it is in fact society’s elite (politicians, particular interest groups, the upper-class media), who is the true initiator of moral panics. In this paper, my goal is not to cast doubt on moral panic as an academically viable concept, and it is by no means to try and theorise on it further, as Thompson and Critcher have done in recent years. This would require extensive research far beyond the scope of this dissertation. I do however subscribe to some of the drawbacks of the original models prepared by Cohen and Ben-Yehuda. Nevertheless, in my view, the amendments to the original processual model of moral panics made by Critcher allow for an application to the timely issue of fear of mass migration from newly associated member states. Critcher (2003) distinguishes eight stages of a process within which a moral panic emerges:

Table 1: The revised processual model of moral panics

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Principal characteristics and/ or actors</i>
1	Emergence	Novelty, threat
2	Media inventory	Stereotyping, exaggeration, distortion, prediction and symbolisation, folk devil
3	Claims making	Moral entrepreneurs, relationship to media orientations, causal explanations
4	Expert involvement	Grounds for claims, media accreditation
5	Elite consensus and concern	Absence of organised opposition
6	Coping and resolution	Proposed solutions, measures adopted (procedural/legal and effective/symbolic)
7	Fade away	Timing, recurrence, subsequent status
8	Legacy	Long-term effects, relationships to other issues

Source: derived from Critcher, 2003, pp. 151-153

The model's first stage captures the emergence of a moral panic. In describing this stage, Critcher draws on Cohen's original formulation of "a condition, episode, person or group of persons" defining the panic's actual object. Since the circumstances that caused a particular moral panic to emerge can in most cases only be determined in retrospect, the idea here is that not so much the condition or the individuals proper are the key initiators, but rather the symbolic threat they carry along (Critcher, 2003). In the emergence stage, clear folk devils are not yet identified. This occurs in the second stage, which Critcher calls "media inventory". Not only is the issue now picked up by the media, its importance quickly becomes oversized, possibly culminating into disproportionality. Critcher writes about his case studies "what started as a sectional interest became a common media agenda", wherein a symbolic threat is covered and exaggerated (Critcher, 2003). In the subsequent, third stage, moral entrepreneurs enter the scene. They can be individuals or institutionalised interest groups, who view the situation as a threat to society or some parts of it. Moral entrepreneurs can be individuals or organisations who consider claims making activities their mission, therewith functioning as society's watchdog, or its "moral border guard". In the fourth stage, experts-in-the-field become involved in the moral panic narrative. Their expertise may be called in by moral entrepreneurs or journalists working on a coverage of the issue at hand, or they may make their ideas heard in a personal capacity. The involvement of expert knowledge indicates the elite's consciousness with the moral panic. The next stage identified by Critcher takes place precisely at the elite level. Convinced by the threat a particular event or group of persons pose(s), the majority of decision-making actors is inclined to take action aiming to counterbalance the threat. Of course, some form of opposition may exist coming from any party in society, but the general attitude towards the folk devils should be hostile and defensive. As a logical consequence, the next stage captures a search for solutions resolving the problem and diminishing the folk devil's potential harmful influence. This can be achieved by amending official regulations, laws and procedures. Apart from their procedural and legal influence, however, the measures taken have an important symbolic function as well: they serve to demonstrate that the issue in question is taken and reacted upon seriously by the elite, obviously often formed by elected politicians or organisations which require a strong support

among the general public. Usually, when action is taken and measures are implemented, the concern slowly fades away. The general public, the elite, the moral entrepreneurs and, especially, the media encounter other social anxieties or triggering events diverting their attention away from the original moral panic. In time, however, it may be renewed by similar events (Critcher, 2003). In the eighth stage, finally, the moral panic is embedded into wider developments in society. New laws are passed and regulations introduced, which might, directly or indirectly, exert influence upon the functioning of law-enforcing institutions, enabling them to once more control society's moral boundaries.

An important drawback to Critcher's extended model is its unfinished status, as he himself refers to it as "work in progress" (Critcher, 2003). Although his aim is to construct an enhanced processual model by drawing on both his own case study results and valuable insights from Goode and Ben-Yehuda's attributional model, the whole remains a somewhat indecisive mixture of stages and characteristics supposedly determining a moral panic. An example of this is the absence of a folk devil in some of the Critcher case studies, which leads him to conclude that their presence is not a necessary requirement. Furthermore, it appears to be difficult to distinguish between moral entrepreneurs/claims makers and experts, who are the same in some cases (in the table, this would imply an overlap of stages 3 and 4). In short, to me it seems that each particular case of moral panic exhibits characteristics of both a processual and an attributional kind, though I doubt whether it will ever be possible to produce an encompassing and exhaustive model in such a bottom-up fashion, wherein multiple case studies and international comparisons are generalised and abstracted. I do think, however, that the model would benefit from a continuous refinement of through processing additional case study results. Its strongest point, therefore, I think is found not so much in its contents, but in the research method it almost naturally implies: that of narratology.

## **4 Methodological notes**

### **4.1 Moral panics and the media**

Both Cohen (1972/1980) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) attributed an important, though not crucial role to the media. According to Cohen, the media act as moral entrepreneur (or claims maker in Goode and Ben-Yehuda's terminology). This role is not considered substantially larger than that of political parties and other interest groups. In other publications on moral panics however, the role of the media is regarded as absolutely vital. Thompson (1998), in the preface of "Moral panics", writes that the title of his book could just as well have been "Moral panics and the media", due to the blend of existing literature on the sociology of deviance with publications on media sociology exhibited in his book (Thompson, 1998). Critcher (2003), who would entitle his work exactly this a couple of years later, in turn offers five extensive case studies of moral panics, in which he concentrates on the role of the media. Thompson and Critcher find that a large part of the "distortion" moral panics suffer from in terms of exaggeration and disproportionality, can be accredited to the media. In this respect, both authors make a

distinction in mass and upper-level media. Evidence shows that in Great Britain, for instance, moral panics are first picked up by the mass media and only then arouse the attention of upper class media. In this respect, taking into account the specific media circumstances of the country in which the moral panic unfolds is highly important. A great deal of the existing literature on moral panics emerged in Britain, where a fairly clear distinction can be made between lower-class and upper-class media, such as the well-known Sun, Daily Mirror and the Daily Mail versus quality newspapers as the Guardian and the Times. As Critcher writes however, “in some countries, for example the Netherlands, tabloid newspapers and their sensationalist brand of journalism are virtually unknown” (Critcher, 2003). A second and related characteristic of Britain’s written media is the absence of important regional and local newspapers. Instead, all national newspapers have a wide circulation throughout the country, which implies that localised events, too, can be published, read, and become a cause of nation-wide concern rather quickly. The famous uproar between the Mods and the Rockers, for instance, occurred in a small seaside town in southern England, but nevertheless featured in every national newspaper the next day (Thompson, 1998). In the Netherlands, with many regional and even city-specific newspapers, this transfer of scale may take more time. Concluding, it can be expected that carrying out a moral panic study in Netherlands on the basis of media coverage might yield results slightly different from those generally found in Britain by, for instance, Thompson and Critcher.

## 4.2 Moral panics and narratology

Without intending to enter into a potentially endless discussion about whether or not everything could be a moral panic in today’s risk society, I would like to carry out a moral panics study of another example of social anxiety, and a topical one I would say. This anxiety could be named “fear of mass migration from new member states after enlargement of the European Union”, or just “fear of mass migration”. In the following sections, I will present a detailed description of the events that have resulted in the partial opening of the Dutch labour market for a limited number of immigrant workers from new member states in the European Union. My goal is to identify, first, whether the political discussion in parliament and the public discussion in the media about the height and impact of this number showed characteristics of shared concern, of consensus about perceived threat, and second, whether the events occurring in the period prior to the government’s final decision have a definable *moral* aspect, resembling the moral panic concept and the boundary drawing rhetoric it implies. In order to illustrate the various relevant textual fragments which appeared in the media over the five-month period ranging from September 2003 until February 2004, I will use the technique of narratology. The use of narratives (detailed chronological case descriptions) as a methodological tool is gaining popularity in the social sciences, but causes reservations as well. The most important reason for this relates to the issue of transferability. Mainstream methodological insights learn that it should be possible to summarise (independent) research results into general knowledge, science’s main “output”. However, others argue that the strength of case study research, which by definition incorporates a narrative element, is to be found not in the general, but in the detail (s.f. Flyvbjerg, 2001). Although it is true that summarising case studies can be difficult, summarising is not always a (socially) useful activity; often, “the narrative itself is the answer” (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The main

goal of a narrative, therefore, is to exhibit rather than to demonstrate (Czarniawska, 1998). The quality of this exhibition is enhanced when there is a sharp eye for detail: “In narrative, the perceived coherence of the sequel (temporal order) of events rather than the truth or falsity of a story elements determines the plot and thus the power of the narrative as a story” (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 5).

To me, choosing narratology as a research method is a logical consequence of engaging in moral panics as a theoretical framework for writing a text or addressing a research question. In each of the main publications on this topic, whether it be the Mods and Rockers case or the various cases Thompson (1998) or Critcher (2003) scrutinise, ranging from sex and AIDS to child abuse and paedophilia, the analysis starts with a detailed narrative of the events unfolding. The narratives are, so to say, a prerequisite enabling the researcher to conclude whether a case is an example of moral panic or not. Moreover, the demand for a strict adherence to chronology in a good narrative is quite in accordance with Critcher’s extended processual model of moral panics. This model can be applied to practical cases only when described accurately from the state of emergence to the state it fades away. Critcher describes the natural connection between narratology and moral panics as follows:

“We do not have to apply formal theories of narrative ... to note that most moral panics tail off when Something Has Been Done – or, more accurately, when Something Has Been Seen To Be Done. If what we have here is a kind of moral fable, in which retribution is exacted upon the perpetrators of evil, then moral panics can be deconstructed as narratives.”  
(Critcher, 2003, p. 141)

As was explained in the introduction to this paper, it took the Dutch government almost five months to decide upon the issuance of the right to free movement to immigrant workers from new member states. In these five months, ranging from September 2003 until February 2004, the issue developed into an intense political and public debate, followed and covered by the media. Although very much aware of its shortcomings, my aim in the remainder of this paper is to apply Critcher’s extended model of moral panics to the case of “fear of mass migration”. I will do this by means of a narrative analysis of the kind described above. This implies that an attempt will be made to make a strict textual chronology of the events culminating in the decision to install a maximum immigrant quota on the 23rd of January, 2004. In my analysis, I will make use of news paper coverage (news, backgrounds, comments), television and radio broadcasts (news, interviews, documentaries) and other written and electronic sources. I will start with a short introduction to immigration and integration issues in the Netherlands. It is important to note that the narrative I intend to write it does not place that much emphasis on context and immediate connection to theory as would be the case with, for instance, a discourse analysis. I would, however, like to point at two excellent examples of discourse analyses of migration and asylum issues. Van Dijk (1997) gives an in-depth account of processes of constructing “others” out of immigrants in western European parliaments. He convincingly demonstrates that, indeed, parliamentary debates often negatively represent immigrants as unknown others and therefore threats to the nation (Van Dijk, 1997). Taking on the perspective of the general public, Lynn and

Lea (2003) analyse the ways in which public opinion about asylum policy in Great Britain as expressed in newspapers contributes to the social construction of asylum seekers. They identify a threefold discursive rhetoric (differentiation of the other, differentiation of the self, and the “enemy in our midst”), that much resembles the creation of a “new Apartheid” with regard to asylum seekers (Lynn and Lea, 2003).

## **5 “Fear of mass migration”: a contemporary moral panic?**

### **5.1 Immigration and integration issues in the Netherlands**

To my knowledge, only one publication has explored the relationship between the concept of moral panics and practical issues of immigration and integration in the Netherlands. In a thought-provoking article, sociologist Erik Snel argues that recent debates on immigration and integration in the Netherlands in many respects resemble the main idea behind moral panics. According to Snel, the country has recently known three strong moral entrepreneurs, who have launched the non-integrating immigrant as a contemporary folk devil (Snel, 2003). The internationally best-known of these claims makers would be right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn. This controversial personality, before his tragic death in May 2002 often accused of sheer populism and arousing negative feelings towards foreigners of non-western decent, plead for restrictive immigration policies in a country which of old has striven for diversity and multiculturalism. In a time wherein economic downturn renders many jobless and dissatisfaction with integration prevails, Fortuyn acted as a true catalyst of national sentiments previously thought of as long vanished. The second moral entrepreneur considered by Snel is Ayaan Hirsi-Ali, one of the Dutch Liberal Conservative Party’s most prominent members. A successfully integrated black Muslim woman, Hirsi-Ali regularly features the news headlines with unconventional ideas about the integration, which according to her ought to be quite synonymous with “adaptation”. Whereas Fortuyn and Hirsi-Ali encouraged the discussion about immigration and integration among the general public, Snel points at political commentator and publicist Paul Scheffer as the moral entrepreneur of the same debate at the elite level (Snel, 2003). Scheffer is the author of an essay called “the multicultural drama”, which appeared in 2000. The essay heavily criticises the failure of minority integration in the Netherlands, and marks the beginning of a wholly different perception of immigration and integration issues. Previously the subject of political care because of economical and cultural deprivations, the (non-western) immigrant was increasingly regarded as a threat to Dutch cultural identity and domestic norms and values from this propelling publication on (Snel, 2003).

Herewith, the “moral” aspect of migration and integration issues is highlighted, justifying a comparison with the concept of moral panics. Although it is only one and by far not the most influential of the many aspects shaping migration discourses in the Netherlands today, “fear of mass migration” only reinforces the perceived need for (moral) boundary enforcement. With regard to labour immigration from new EU member states, Snel quotes a concern “for uncontrollable consequences, for ‘overstretch’ threatening our society’s character” (Snel, 2003). Hier (2003) arrives at similar conclusions for Canada, where a moral panic-like fear was

experienced concerning the arrival of hundreds of illegal Chinese immigrants at the same time. In the course of a two-month period, reporting media were full of exaggerated stories depicting the immigrants as crime- and uncertainty-enhancing “elements”, thereby creating both an awareness of social transformation in Canada and a longing for Euro-Canadian tradition (Hier, 2003).

## 5.2 The narrative

### *An “alert” member of parliament*

According to Critcher, reconstructing the exact moment when a moral panic starts off can be difficult. A key triggering event “may be found in the middle rather than at the beginning of a moral panic narrative” (Critcher, 2003). In this case however, I would say that the panic about potential mass immigration from new member states after EU enlargement was launched by a Member of Parliament (MoP) from the Liberal Conservative Party. When preparing for the parliamentary debate over the ratification of the Athens Treaty, the MoP comes across the fact that the Netherlands, contrary to most other EU member states at that time (summer 2003), had not yet taken a decision about whether or not to close borders for eastern European migrant workers. He recalls in an interview with “Elsevier”, a weekly opinion magazine:

“I had just been appointed Member of Parliament, assembled all document material, and found out that parliament never really had discussed properly about the admittance of the eastern European immigrants. Every aspect [of the Treaty] had been discussed and negotiated, but not this one.”<sup>2</sup>

(Interview with Elsevier published on November 15, text in brackets added)

Soon after, on September 24, the MoP participates in a debate in the Dutch Lower Chamber (Tweede Kamer), which is about an amendment of the so-called Law on Alien Labour concerning the Acquisition of Labour Supply from states outside the European Economic Area. During the discussion, he points to the fact that previous Dutch administrations had been basing their decision not to close the labour markets for immigrant workers from new member states on a report published in 2001 by the Socio-Economic Council (Sociaal-Economische Raad), a rather influential advisory body to the government<sup>3</sup>. At that time, the Dutch economy was still booming, and the report explicitly assumed that these favourable circumstances would largely continue. In the course of the debate, the MoP introduces the following motion:

“The Chamber, having taken notice of the debate, considering, that as a consequence of the economic slowdown unemployment in the Netherlands is increasing, that after accession of 10 new member states into the European Union a further distortion of the labour market can be feared caused by an inflow of relatively cheap labourers, that the accession treaty

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes are literally translated from Dutch. I have attempted to stay as close to the exact meaning of the Dutch texts as possible without producing bad English (or good “Dunglish”, as some prefer to call English with obvious Dutch word use and sequence). For reasons of transparency and privacy, no names of key actors involved in the “fear of mass migration” narrative are mentioned.

<sup>3</sup> The current Dutch administration is a centre-rightwing coalition of the Liberal Conservative Party, the Christian Democrat Party and the Democrat Party.

leaves open the possibility for the [present] member states not to open the labour market for these workers for a period of up to 7 years, calls upon the government to, if necessary, take measures in time by maintaining or accomplishing a general policy measure based on the Law on Alien Labour to keep the Dutch labour markets closed to employees from the new member states, for the time being...”

(Official parliamentary documentation on <http://parlando.sdu.nl>, September 24)

The motion is directed to the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, who is responsible for Dutch labour market policy. Although the Deputy Minister is not completely convinced of the importance of the arguments brought forward by the MoP, he admits that up-to-date information about the numbers of migrants to be expected after EU enlargement is lacking, as well as knowledge about the positions of other western European countries besides Germany and Austria. He therefore promises parliament to come up with a memorandum on the advantages and disadvantages of issuing the right to free movement to labour immigrants from new member states. Apart from reconsidering to close borders, he will also study the possibility to require work permits after enlargement. This memorandum is due by the end of the year (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, September 24).

#### *Claims making activities*

After a month of relative silence, the issue is picked up by several other Members of Parliament, on both sides of the political spectrum. The immediate cause for this is the appearance of the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment in NOVA, a daily current affairs television programme, on October 28. During the broadcast, the expectation is uttered that 30,000 labour immigrants will be coming from Poland only. In response to this, the Deputy Minister declares that “these are no numbers to be worried about” (NOVA, October 28). A couple of days later, two MoP’s of the Christian Democrat Party express their concern over this statement, as they doubt the absorption capacity of the Dutch labour market for such a high number of immigrant workers. They demand to be told, firstly, the effects of these expected developments for domestic workers, the low-skilled in particular, secondly, an estimation of numbers of legal and illegal eastern European employees presently working in the Netherlands, and thirdly, how many of these people are in possession of a German passport, allowing them free entrance onto the Dutch labour market already (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, November 6).

That same week, the conservative MoP who can by now be considered to be the initiator of the discussion, increases his pressure on the Deputy Minister by officially asking him to clarify his expectations on the inflow of seasonal workers after EU enlargement. This question is based on an article in the Agrarian Newspaper, in which a couple of smaller rural municipalities declare to be building hundreds of extra housing facilities for employees from new member states (Agrarisch Dagblad, October 30). The MoP demands that the Deputy Minister examine unemployment rates and labour supply in the region in question, and whether the initiative taken by these municipalities is in accordance with official Dutch housing policy (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, November 5). In addition, he once more repeats the questions asked during the debate about the EU member states issuing and not issuing freedom of movement, as

well as the demand to reconsider the decision taken by the previous Dutch administration. The Deputy Minister responds that he is working on the memorandum which will capture all of the questions asked (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, November 6).

On November 19, the Lower Chamber discusses the ratification of the Athens Treaty. Although the topic of free movement of persons is but one of the many topics on the agenda in the afternoon and evening of the day on which this much encompassing debate takes place, it turns out to be the most controversial one. Pim Fortuyn's Party<sup>4</sup> LPF joins the Liberal Conservatives and the Christian Democrats in their wish that, due to the already disadvantageous and worsening economic situation in the Netherlands, and due to the fact that several neighbouring member states have already decided to close borders, the Dutch position not to should be reconsidered. The left-wing Labour Party, Democrat Party and the Green Party oppose rather firmly, evaluating such a reconsideration "being not very decent" and "breaking a promise already made" (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, November 19). Nevertheless, when the facts about expected immigration will prove to be a cause of concern indeed, all parties declare to let go of their objections. The outer left-wing Socialist Party and the conservative/traditional Christian Parties share this view.

#### *Enter the media*

Although the heated discussion does not bring the actual decision any closer, as all of the political parties prefer to await the memorandum prepared by the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Unemployment, it causes a storm of media attention, particularly in the various national newspapers. In the days after the debate, several MoP's are repeatedly quoted, most notably the Liberal Conservative MoP<sup>5</sup> who fears that "the Netherlands will become the lowest drain on the European labour market"<sup>6</sup> if borders are kept open (quoted in *Volkskrant* on November 20, and in *Trouw* on November 22). The spokesman of the Labour Party and the spokeswoman of the Democrat Party in turn accuse the right-wing parties outright of "arousing negative sentiments" outside of parliament in appearances in the general public (*Volkskrant*, November 20). More specifically, they are referring to the visit of the Dutch Minister of Finance to a conference of his Conservative Party. During the conference, he declares himself to be "against cheap Poles", as the headlines of an article covering the conference reveals (*NRC Handelsblad*, November 18). Furthermore, the Minister says:

"In case Germany, for instance, decides to temporarily close its labour market for Polish employees, they will flow to the Netherlands. We should not want that."

(Quoted in *NRC Handelsblad*, November 18)

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<sup>4</sup> The right-wing party established by Fortuyn in the run-up to the 2002 parliamentary elections continued its existence under the same name after his death.

<sup>5</sup> This MoP is a fellow party member of the MoP who initiated the debate in September 2003.

<sup>6</sup> According to the official report of this debate in the Lower Chamber, the MoP in question actually says "the lowest point on the European labour market" in stead of "the lowest drain" as the newspapers quoted. The Dutch words for point (*punt*) and drain (*put*) are very similar, implying that either parliament's stenographer or a recording journalist could have misheard it. In either case, the word "drain" indisputably adds a dramatic flavour to the statement (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, 2003).

More important even than the supposedly provocative words the Minister of Finance utters, both spokespersons are tempted to draw the conclusion that the free movement issue has been discussed and perhaps even decided upon by members of the administration already, albeit behind closed doors. They are suspicious of a hidden agenda in favour of closing the labour market, in imitation of Germany, Austria and other countries (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, November 19). During the debate however, the accusation is denied by his fellow party members. In the aftermath, the Democrat Minister of Economic Affairs relaxes the “hidden agenda” theory, as he turns out to be a fierce advocate of free movement (Volkskrant, November 26). This is in fact not all that surprising, as the Minister of Economic Affairs is generally known to take on pro-European standpoints. The discussion in Parliament between, most notably, the Liberal Conservatives, the Christian Democrats and Pim Fortuyn’s Party on the one hand and the Democrats, the Labour Party and the Green Party on the other manifests itself within the administration between the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Economic Affairs.

### *The discussion spreads*

With a deadlock between two powerful administration members thus reached, the last two weeks of November and the first two of December witness the rise of the public’s voice in the media. Whereas media coverage up until now consisted mainly of reports of debates in parliament and relatively short news flashes, comments on the issue of labour immigration from new member states can increasingly be found in opinion sections, columns and background articles. A telling example appears, for instance, in NRC Handelsblad on November 21, when an anonymous reader argues that the fear of eastern European immigrant workers stealing away jobs from domestic workers is completely out of place. S/he points at the fact that seasonal migration from central and eastern European countries has been both a common and a successful phenomenon in the Netherlands in recent years, and to “mutual satisfaction of employers as well as employees”:

“Employers are happy because Poles work hard, don’t complain and hardly become ill. With an old-fashioned work-ethic they will pluck gerberas, prune tomatoes or cultivate asparagus in Brabant and Limburg<sup>7</sup> in spring. For many years now it has been impossible to find Dutch employees for these jobs, which are known to be quite harsh.”

(Quoted in NRC Handelsblad, November 21)

Subsequently, the reader pleads for a combat against illegal immigration rather than an exclusion of legal workers. Although hers or his professional background is unknown, it would seem that the reader has a substantial amount of background knowledge to the subject. In general, public comments about the issuance of free movement to labour immigrants from new member states come from people who can be regarded experts in the field. Among them for instance a professor of public finance, expressing his concern over the competitive position of domestic low-rated workers when the labour market is opened. He also points at a potential increase of

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<sup>7</sup> Brabant and Limburg are Dutch provinces (or, in EU-terminology, NUTS II regions). In May and June of each year, in between 3,000 to 6,000 (estimations vary) immigrant workers from central and eastern Europe, especially from Poland, visit these provinces in order to work in agriculture or construction. The asparagus cultivation in Brabant and Limburg is particularly well-known for attracting seasonal migration.

government expenditures on social security benefits after enlargement (Financieele Dagblad, November 21). The professors' concerns are contradicted by MoP's from the Labour Party who accuse him of "elementary school calculating" (Financieele Dagblad, December 10). Obviously irritated by these words, the professor in turn accuses the Labour Party of engaging in "ostrich policy" (Financieele Dagblad, December 19). This is an illustrative example of political-public interaction in the media.

From November 29 until December 13, the regional newspaper Limburgs Dagblad publishes an article series about Polish immigrant workers in the Netherlands and Germany, and more specifically in the province of Limburg. In eight background articles, a wide range of related topics is covered, ranging from the existence of "malafide" labour agencies taking advantage of powerless immigrants to the negative consequences of the drain of young men from Polish villages. Although the series provides a realistic and by no means over-dramatised view of the issue, the objective reader cannot but conclude from it that there are indeed quite a lot of immigrants to be expected after EU-enlargement. One of the articles is dedicated to German Poles from areas in southern Poland which belonged to Germany before the Second World War. Since these people still have German passports, they will be able to freely enter the Dutch labour market regardless of the decision of the Dutch government. Most of the many Poles in possession of German passports are, according to the article, quite willing and indeed preparing to migrate after enlargement<sup>8</sup>. Similar conclusions are drawn by the makers of another article series in "Financieele Dagblad", entitled "The neighbours are coming". Apart from sharing the concern over Poles with German passports being mistreated by labour agencies (December 6), they call in the expertise of a migration professor (November 28 and December 10), several economists (November 28) and the president of the most important labour union in the Netherlands (December 16). Starting from the assumption that migrants will be allowed onto the Dutch labour market after EU-enlargement at some stage in time anyway, the discussion in this (economically-financially oriented) newspaper centres around the question whether or not to allow them Dutch social security benefits.

The labour union, generally quite an influential actor in Dutch wage negotiations and other employment issues, turns out to be one of the most powerful advocates of opening up the border/unrestricted access. According to their website, the union states "not to be worried by the stream of migrants crossing Europe" ([www.bondgenoten.fnv.nl](http://www.bondgenoten.fnv.nl), December 7). In fact, the labour union uses the discussion to raise a related discussion about the need for a European-wide regulation for immigrant workers. Such a "detach guideline" is already effective in the construction sector (wherein a lot of immigrant workers from new member states are currently active), and would need introduction in other sectors as well. The president of the union says that the desire for a future unified European labour market calls for a re-thinking of national collective labour agreements. He argues that Dutch provisions need to be extended to immigrant

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<sup>8</sup> Whether they will or will not migrate in the end is not important here, as the newspaper article serves to illustrate the migration potential of the Poles in question. Empirical research has demonstrated, however, that migration potential hardly serves as an accurate migration forecast (see the previous paper).

workers, now and in the future. The most important reason for doing this is to combat misuse, illegal migration and human trafficking (Financieele Dagblad, December 16).

*Producing factual evidence*

Determined to come up with a well-informed policy decision, the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment asks a renowned government-affiliated research agency to conduct an in-depth study into the advantages and disadvantages of admitting labour from new member states. This Dutch Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) delivers the main “ingredient” for the Deputy Minister’s memorandum on January 14, 2004. In a brief, though detailed report, the CPB concludes that in spite of other member states having decided to temporarily close down the labour market, a relatively small inflow of immigrant workers from new member states can be expected after enlargement. Based on an analysis of several migration forecasts carried out by both academic and non-academic researcher, the Bureau estimates an additional number of in between 3,500 and 8,500 immigrant workers (CPB, 2004). This range does not include seasonal migration. Moreover, the Bureau expects the majority of these immigrants to fulfil still existing job vacancies in the bottom segment of the labour market. In that case, no substantial “harm” will be done to social welfare systems in the Netherlands (CPB, 2004).

For the Liberal Conservative Party, the report is convincing enough to let go of the demand for the closure of the Dutch labour market. Their spokesman says that numbers “look good” (Volkskrant, January 15). The Minister of Finance however, also a Conservative, still holds on to his preference of closing the labour market. The same is true for the Christian Democrats and Pim Fortuyn’s Party, who seem to be determined not to issue free movement, regardless of the report and the forthcoming decision of the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment (Volkskrant, January 15). In a 30-page letter published on January 23, almost a month later than initially foreseen, the Deputy Minister informs parliament about this decision, which turns out to be a compromise between opposing parties, so typical of Dutch politics. Instead of fully opening or closing the Dutch labour market on the first of May, a limited number of 22,000 immigrants will be allowed access (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, January 23). This figure is based on the estimations made by the Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, complemented with numbers of seasonal migration. In case more than 22,000 people enter, the labour market will be closed. The letter explicitly states that caution is in order:

“In this respect, it is important to keep in mind that, as the CPB annotates, the estimations are surrounded with insecurities. This insecurity about the actual number of labour migrants contains a risk that gains weight when unemployment in the Netherlands rises.”

(<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, January 23)

For this reason, the government leaves open the possibility to take further restricting measures if preliminary numbers of migrants indicate the necessity to do so. Asked about his reaction to the letter, the Dutch Prime Minister replies brief and to the point:

“We do acknowledge free movement of persons, but we will not overlook the effects for our labour market.”

(Quoted in Volkskrant, January 23)

Herewith, one would expect the issue to be “dealt with”. To the surprise of many however, not in the least place of the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment, the last words have not at all been said. When discussing the letter in parliament on February 3, a majority of parties (the Liberal Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, Pim Fortuyn’s Party and the Socialist Party) evaluates the proposed limit as being not strict enough. Still convinced of a greater migration “threat” than forecasted by the CPB, no less than five motions are introduced in the course of the debate, either highlighting a specific aspect of the free movement issue or proposing a solution (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, February 3). There is, for instance, a demand that official requirements for receiving a work permit for immigrant workers from new EU-countries should be as strict as those for non-EU (and non-EFTA) employees. Another motion questions the migrant’s ability to integrate into Dutch society, and consequently pleads for them to become acquainted with Dutch language and culture (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, February 3). The argument proposed by the spokesman of Pim Fortuyn’s Party is particularly lively, as it refers to the love-hate relationship between the Dutch and water:

“Driven by a dead-end situation in their home country and hoping to receive a royal income here, workers will massively go westward. It is like water, always flowing to the lowest point. Coincidentally, the Netherlands is the lowest country in Europe, which means that we need to be prepared. If the flow turns out to be high tide, we will be too late, because we failed to take appropriate measures by digging a canal and building dikes.”

(<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, February 3)

Upon hearing so many doubts and comments, the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment promises to re-discuss the issue within the administration one more time.

#### *A climax at last*

After almost five months of intense, sometimes heated debates and discussions in parliament and the various media, the “fear of mass migration” narrative reaches its climax when the government decides upon a final solution on February 13, 2004. In a second, much shorter letter to parliament, the Deputy Minister announces that instead of installing the 22,000 maximum, migrants from new member states will be granted access only into specific sectors of the economy (<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, February 13). In these sectors, labour shortages should be perceived as structural and not to be fulfilled by Dutch workers ((<http://parlando.sdu.nl>, February 13 and Volkskrant, February 14). The majority of sectors however will be closed until 2006. Having achieved this result, the demanding political parties clearly emerge as overall “winners” of the debate. The most important opposing actors, the Democrat Party and the labour union declare to be very disappointed. They question the feasibility of the measures proposed, especially with regard to the drawing of a list of “open” sectors, which will be adapted and updated according to the needs of the moment (Volkskrant, February 14 and Trouw, February

14). Still however, the administration explicitly keeps open the possibility to further restrict free movement in case either the number of immigrants coming exceeds expectations, or the enlargement process of the European Union enters a new phase, implying both the accession of Romania and Bulgaria and that of nations further eastward. In the November 2003 “Elsevier” interview, the Liberal Conservative MoP who first initiated the discussion in the Lower Chamber indirectly forecasts such a re-emergence of the “fear of mass migration” narrative, thereby placing the issue in a wider discussion on the future boundaries of the European Union:

“And then there’s something else. After enlargement of the European Union, another flow of illegal immigrants will come from countries further east, such as Ukraine. I receive quite a lot of reactions from staff working at employment agencies, who are warning precisely for this.”

(Interview with Elsevier published on November 15, 2003)

By the time the Dutch decision is finally through, yet another immigration-related issue has taken over the media headlines and political and public debate. A direct consequence of recent calls for a strengthened immigration and asylum policy forthcoming current migration discourses in the Netherlands (as described in section 5.1), the Dutch Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration launches a highly controversial proposal to expel 26,000 “low-opportunity” rejected asylum seekers. Heavy protests arise from the side of immigration interest groups as well as local policymakers, destined to put these harsh measures into practice. This protest is fuelled by the media, eagerly portraying many of the asylum seekers, which causes the issue to completely overpower “fear of mass migration”. The Minister of Alien Affairs herself speaks of a true “media hype” (NOVA broadcast, February 3). On February 11, nevertheless, NRC Handelsblad opens with the heading “Inhospitable Europe makes Poles feel bitter”, introducing a story about feelings of unpleasant surprise and resentment among policymakers and citizens in Poland as an immediate reaction to the decision of so many current EU member states to close their borders.

### **5.3 Drawing the threads together**

When the “fear of mass migration” narrative is applied to Critcher’s extended model of moral panics, a number of interesting observations can be made. First of all, although each of the stages defined by Critcher is present in the narrative, their sequence is different. Widespread attention of the various media comes in after claims making activities by a number of concerned Members of Parliament, and experts-in-the-field enter the stage when all political parties already acknowledge potential mass migration from new member states to be a “problem” that needs coping, or at least discussion. Therefore, concluding that an “absence of organised opposition” is the case here would not do justice to the efforts made by MoP’s from the Labour, Democrat and Green Parties as well as the labour union. Furthermore, it would seem that the intensity and therefore the impact of the various stages vary as well. Claims making activities in parliament have been both frequent and intense. Contrary to this, although a great deal of attention indeed is paid to the free movement issue by the various media, far-reaching stereotyping and exaggeration was not found, with the exception of some provocative headlines (“Help! The Poles are coming”)

and denigrating quotes (“eastern European drooping moustaches”). In line with this, Critcher’s argument about society’s elites rather than the general public as *the* actors perceiving a particular threat, is confirmed. Newspaper coverage and television broadcasts by “upper-class” media (in the form of opinion sections, article series, discussion programmes and documentaries) cause uproar among politicians and experts-in-the-field, and not (so much) among the general public. Obviously, it is important to take into account country-specific media characteristics here, with Dutch media being perhaps less sensationalist and nationally-oriented than for instance in Great Britain and Germany.

Table 2: The “fear of mass migration” narrative applied to Critcher’s extended model of moral panics

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Principal characteristics and/or actors</i>
1	Emergence	The Liberal Conservative MoP introduces a motion in parliament’s Lower Chamber.
2	Claims making	The Liberal Conservatives (most notably the Minister of Finance), the Christian Democrats, Pim Fortuyn’s Party and the Socialist Party claim a threat to the labour market, the housing market, the welfare state and Dutch cultural identity.
3	Elite consensus and concern	All political parties agree to await a clarifying report to be prepared by the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment. The Minister of Economic Affairs firmly holds on to free movement throughout the discussion.
4	Media inventory	Numerous stories appear in newspapers, on TV, radio and the Internet, covering news (e.g. debates between advocates and opponents) and backgrounds.
5	Expert involvement	(Academic) experts express their concern over the migrant’s influence onto the Dutch welfare state. Others, among which the labour union, relax this influence by pointing at the advantages as well as the necessity of labour migration in an ageing society.
6	Coping and resolution	The government decides to introduce a limit to the number of migrants to be allowed access; upon protests, it decides to impose strict requirements to the issuance of work permits in specific sectors in addition.
7	Fade away	The discussion over whether or not to expel 26,000 asylum seekers (according to the Minister of Alien Affairs a true “media hype”), overtakes “fear of mass migration”.
8	Legacy	Immediate consequences will become known in the period after EU-enlargement. Long-term legacy is expected to become manifest in discussions about future enlargement rounds and the EU’s final external border.

Source: Critcher, 2003, pp. 151-153

The question that remains is to which extent the “fear of mass migration” narrative matches the concept of moral panics. Taking into account the drawbacks of Critcher’s model and the case-specific characteristics inherent to each moral panics study (Thompson, 1998, Critcher, 2003), I would say that evidence of fear and shared concern was indeed found. Although perhaps the outcomes themselves are of a temporary nature, as free movement will be issued to inhabitants of new member states at some point in the (nearby) future anyhow, the narrative itself provides insight into the complex balance between fear and desire of labour migration in current EU member states. In that respect, I subscribe to the idea brought forward by Flyvbjerg that the narrative rather than its particular outcome is what counts most. With regard to the morality of the “fear of mass migration” narrative, there is little doubt at first sight that a stronger “moral” element is embodied in, for instance, the discussion about expelling rejected asylum seekers (though much resembling a bogus moral, I would say). Concerns about eastern European immigrant’s impact on labour and housing markets seem straightforward rather than moral, regarding the current disadvantageous situation in both of these segments of Dutch society combined with the fact that almost all of the other EU member states are bordering immigrants from new member states as well. However, the migrants’ perceived influence on the Dutch welfare state and Dutch national identity do have a clearly definable moral aspect, since these conceptualisations of social space are by definition bounded (contrary to the respective transnational and cross-border character of the labour market and the housing market). It so seems that the current order of the welfare state system and of territorial identity, rooted and established in periods well before migration discourses altered direction in the early 1990s in the Netherlands (and in other industrialised countries as well), is challenged. A change towards a new such order which includes people who are not necessarily born in the Netherlands and do not necessarily (always) contribute to the Dutch economy, would require radically different views on issues such as statehood, citizenship and integration, far more directed towards the acceptance of diversity than is the case now.

## **6 Conclusion**

Although it would be hard to call “fear of mass migration” a perfect example of moral panic, the narrative elaborated in this paper did provide support for the view that political decisions over sensitive issues such as migration are grounded in and caused by fear of becoming “flooded” and a forthcoming desire to close the nation’s borders and to shut down the labour market. Although the narrative itself cannot be summarised into general knowledge, its wider significance becomes visible when compared to similar discussions in other settings. First of all, the same debates have been held in every other EU member states, and with very much the same outcomes. This sheds some light, at least, on the extent to which the idea(l) of solidarity towards new member states and their citizens is being observed in present member states. When placed against a background of EU-enlargement rounds still to come, starting with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in a couple of years from now, the question arises whether controversies over migration in the member states will co-determine where the EU’s external borders will ultimately lie. The conclusions drawn in this paper are also relevant as in a wider perspective of policies and

practices towards asylum seekers and undocumented migrants from outside the EU. The re-bordering of the European Union is a yet unfinished process, and so are its efforts to (selectively) include and exclude immigrants, whether they come for economic or political purposes. With the exception of a few who are directed towards clearly specified sectors in order to fulfil well-demarcated jobs, most immigrants are kept out as undesired strangers. There is no doubt that the balance weighing fear and desire for migration is built upon thick moral grounds.

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### Contact details:

E-mail: A.Lagendijk@nsm.kun.nl

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Dr Arnoud Lagendijk

Nijmegen School of Management

PO Box 9108

NL-6500 HK Nijmegen

The Netherlands

Tel. (+31/0)24- 3616204/3611925

Fax: (+31/0)24 - 3611841

