

Not So Comic Criminalization

Paul Buhle

2025

a review of

Down By Law: Criminalization, Solidarity and Survival in Europe Edited by the CrimScapes Research Group. PM Press/Kairos, 2025

Graphic novels (GNs) and anthologies very often effect personal experiences, and for that matter, the non-fiction shelf is comparatively thin. The GN treatment of homeless and semi-homeless people, even amidst the world-wide explosion of that hard-hit slice of humanity, remains almost invisible.

Down By Law is a collaborative graphic novel bearing the imprint of Kairos and its series editor, erstwhile Yugoslavian dissident anarcho-syndicalist Andrej Grubacic, has a usefully different idea. Its editors want to track and explain “criminalization as a tool of governance.” The abnormal, the morally unacceptable, the unwanted—all these have become more common in the social crises of our time, and more criminalized. Laws seeking to protect the vulnerable, but carried out by existing law enforcement agencies, turn out to be something different. Social controls cannot guard us against the reality of Capital.

The stories within the book are an artistic creation, fact and near-fact narratives, from the work of research groups across Europe. Comics, clearly, are now rightly perceived as an effective way to get the stories across to popular audiences. Indeed, the studious reader may want to look first to the back pages because the ten (!) contributors, artists and (mostly) cultural anthropologists, seek to explain in personal as well as political ways, how their collective contributions deal with the social crisis at hand. They are mostly young, equal numbers of women and men, and their own lives, briefly and modestly described, almost tell the story themselves.

Some of these are, in several page chunks, nearly wordless. “It’s OK to Cry: Doing Time in a Women’s Prison in Germany” by Friederike Faust, Valerie Assman and Jan Peuckert, transfers the experience of isolation onto paper. When we finally learn of the person’s actual crime, it is clear that her parents died in the 1990s Balkan wars and in struggling to survive, she has committed online fraud.

We grasp her urgent aspiration of the moment, to be in an “open prison,” reunited with her baby, and also one step closer to release. Her behavior during imprisonment is so closely restricted that the problem of several others in the book becomes clear: she dare not make a single mistake, not even a moment of non-violent playfulness with a fellow inmate. Disapproval brings swift punishment, a terrible setback at that moment in a stressed life.

Here, then, even a happy ending is likely to have fearful qualities. In “Quicksand” by Agata Dziban and Aleksandra Sasza, Stachwska is the narrative of a twenty-year sex worker. Leaving poverty and danger in Ukraine, she tries work in a Polish factory, is discharged and deported, and then hears from a friend that sex work is “OK,” better than the alternatives.

She works in a large Polish brothel, making just enough to send money home to her children. Free rent becomes a major inducement to the life. Dodging police raids, getting money to the kids in Poland and then bringing them to her, she and her workmates create a working collective with good spirit among themselves. And then, in the last panel, comes the war in Ukraine. No happy ending.

“The Date” by Juulia Kela and H-P Lehkonen treats the effects, intended and otherwise, of Finnish laws that seek to protect sex partners through punishments of those who do not disclose their HIV status. The authorities claim to protect the vulnerable. The legal definitions are so vague, their use in the courtroom so liable to misinterpretation, that not even the emergence of new medication to prevent spread of the virus makes much difference.

Others forced into exile learn, for instance, from graffiti, that “Bosnians are Subhuman.” That is, themselves. That Africans fleeing poverty via the Mediterranean are definitely disposable, despite the efforts (sometimes successful) by NGO activists to save them

“The assumption is that treating poor people kindly would set the wrong incentive” might be taken as the effective generalization of this volume, with the consequence four pages later, “These penalties create confinement and isolation” rather than what a society would presumably want.

The false solution is time-old, and also the source of some of the finest anarchist writing from at least the mid-19th century onward. Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Malatesta and Emma Goldman, to name only a few, pondered the roles of punishment and especially imprisonment for crime.

Surrealists famously called for armies to be abolished and prison doors to be opened. If class society is responsible for mass suffering, then mutual aid is the only solution. Unlike educational reform or the establishment of utopian communities, anarchists had few opportunities to enact law enforcement or prison reforms. But their testimony reached many people including prison reformers.

A comic worth enjoying, pondering, and passing on.

Paul Buhle has edited fifteen nonfiction, historical comics since *WOBBLIES!* in 2005, and is working with Raymond Tyler and Noah Van Sciver on a graphic novel history of anarchism. He lives in Providence, R.I.



Paul Buhle
Not So Comic Criminalization
2025

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/417-winter-2025/not-so-comic-criminalization>
Fifth Estate #417, Winter 2025

fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net