Buchbesprechungen

CrimScapes Research Group (Eds.)
Down by Law. Criminalization, Solidarity, and Survival in Europe. Oakland: PM Press/Kairos 2025, 128 S. ISBN 979-8-88744-101-6.

I began reading "Down by Law" at a moment when the convergence of borders, policing, securitisation, and criminalisation became all the more evident and the atmosphere rather claustrophobic. On 21 November 2025, Italian comic artist and activist Elena Mistrello was denied entry into France to attend the *BD Colomiers Festival* in Toulouse (France), to which she had been invited to present the French translation of her graphic novel "Le syndrôme d'Italie" (2021; 2025). At the airport, she was stopped by three police officers who, after checking her passport, informed her that she was not allowed to enter France due to a notice from the Ministry of the Interior identifying her as a "serious threat to public order". She was handed a deportation order. The only explanation Mistrello has been able to offer is that the report against her is likely to relate to her participation, in June 2023, in a demo in Paris on the 10th anniversary of the murder of Clément Méric, a young radical left activist killed by three neo-Nazis. Apparently, this event brought Mistrello to the attention of French national security authorities. Details aside, this episode reads less as an administrative mishap than as a poignant case where increasing securitisation turns ordinary political participation into a liability. Shortly afterwards, Zerocalcare's "Nel nido dei serpenti" (2025) was published in Italy. Zero's new graphic book focuses on detention, expulsion, and the tightening grip of European states on political activists. It brings together a series of short stories he originally published in the Italian magazine *Internazionale* about a controversial legal case involving seventeen European activists arrested after clashes with far-right groups in Budapest, Hungary, in 2023.

If you wonder, these events are not at all incidental to "Down by Law", which I believe belongs to the same political landscape that both Zerocalcare's book and Elena Mistrello's episode document: the re-making of Europe, in which any form of dissent is increasingly governed through criminalisation, surveillance, and repression in the name of security. At the same time, they all foreground the often-overlooked power of comics and graphic novels to create spaces for resistance, solidarity and powerful critique of the status quo. It is within this broader – not necessarily academic – landscape that "Down by Law" must be situated.

Edited by the *CrimScapes Research Group* and published by PM Press and Kairos, "Down by Law" is a collection of eight short graphic narratives addressing the expansion of criminalisation across Europe. CrimScapes is a research collective whose members have conducted long-term ethnographic research across multiple sites, and whose empirical material underpins the stories gathered in the volume. The narratives are, however, deliberately fictionalised – an ethical and political choice designed to protect interlocutors and preserve their anonymity in contexts where exposure can produce further harm. In this sense, "Down by Law" does not document events as they happened but rather insists on a conditional register: criminalisation *could* happen this way. In doing so, it shows how ordinary lives become entangled in legal regimes that promise protection but produce vulnerability, precarity, harm and, paradoxically, illegality.

The stories range from search-and-rescue missions in the Mediterranean ("You're not welcome!") to sex work in Poland ("Quicksand"), substitute prison sentences and homelessness ("The sounds of doors closing") and women's prison ("It's OK to cry: Doing time in a women's prison") in Germany, abortion activism in Poland ("You will never walk alone"), HIV criminalisation in Finland ("The date"), the criminalisation of drug users in Poland ("Swing low sweet cherry") and online hate-speech moderation in Germany ("Think happy thoughts!"). What links these otherwise diverse contexts and stories is not a shared object of inquiry but a shared condition: women, migrants, homeless youth and other vulnerable subjects' experience of living under legal regimes that operate less through spectacular punishment than through fines, paperwork, surveillance, waiting and the constant threat of sanction or further punishment. The book is at its strongest where it shows criminalisation not as an exceptional response to wrongdoings but as an ordinary mode of governance.

The opening story, "You're not welcome!", follows a search-and-rescue mission in the Mediterranean. The sea here is a militarised border-space governed by international law, dense with satellite surveillance and xenophobic political propaganda. However, rescue is not outlawed outright; it is obstructed, delayed, fined, and publicly vilified. The other stories shift inland Europe, tracing how criminalisation penetrates domestic and public spaces. The account of substitute prison sentences in Germany exposes a system in which poverty itself becomes punishable: unpaid fines for minor offences, such as riding a bus without a valid ticket, are automatically converted into incarceration through bureaucratic procedures that presume access to economic and legal resources many simply do not have. The violence here is procedural rather than spectacular and precisely for this reason, effective. Similarly, the stories on abortion access in Poland and HIV criminalisation in Finland foreground how law governs bodies through moralising notions of risk, responsibility and danger. Care work and solidarity here emerge as both a form of activism and a

criminal risk while repression often takes the form not of direct punishment but of self-regulation: avoiding protests, staying out of sight, minimising exposure. Invisibility becomes a strategy for survival. What "Down by Law" does not do – and this is, I believe, one of its strengths – is present its protagonists as either heroes or passive victims. The people who populate these stories are ambivalent, cautious, tired. Sometimes they hold contradictory positions, but they always endure, negotiate, withdraw, start again and improvise. In increasingly repressive contexts, solidarity is not a slogan but a set of very mundane practices: pooling money to pay fines, sharing information, accompanying someone to court, knowing when to remain silent.

Crucially, the power of "Down by Law" does not lie in its novelty as an "*ethno*graphic" or "multimodal" intervention. Comics have long been a politically committed form of expression and critique, capable of rendering complex realities without simplification or didacticism. Long before anthropology turned to graphic narratives, graphic journalism and graphic novels had already been documenting war, state violence, labour struggles, migration, incarceration and everyday forms of oppression. I hope there will be no need to go into lengthy retrospectives on Joe Sacco's work. What "Down by Law" achieves, at its best, is not the invention or reclamation of a new method but a return to this tradition of politically engaged comics. At a time when securitisation, criminalisation and militarisation are increasingly presented as pragmatic responses to any crisis, "Down by Law" refuses both sensationalism and liberal reassurance. It offers no solutions, best practices or policy recommendations. Instead, it insists on paying ethnographic attention to how law produces harm, to how governance operates through attrition rather than spectacle and to how people continue to care for one another under conditions designed to isolate and exhaust them. It would be a shame if the book would be read solely through the narrow lens of academic innovation, as yet another evidence that anthropology has finally "discovered" comics as a serious medium. The strength of "Down by Law" is its alignment with a longer history of engaged comics that have always been capable of unravelling complex realities without pedagogical redundancy. In this sense, "Down by Law" is less a methodological statement than a political one: a reminder that criminalisation is always the problem and never the solution, and that comics remain one of the most powerful ways to show, unravel and critique reality in all its often-unpleasant complexity.

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https://doi.org/10.31244/zekw/2026/01.17