Against the Cell.

Illegalism After Prairieland or Against Legibility. How Movements Become Evidence.

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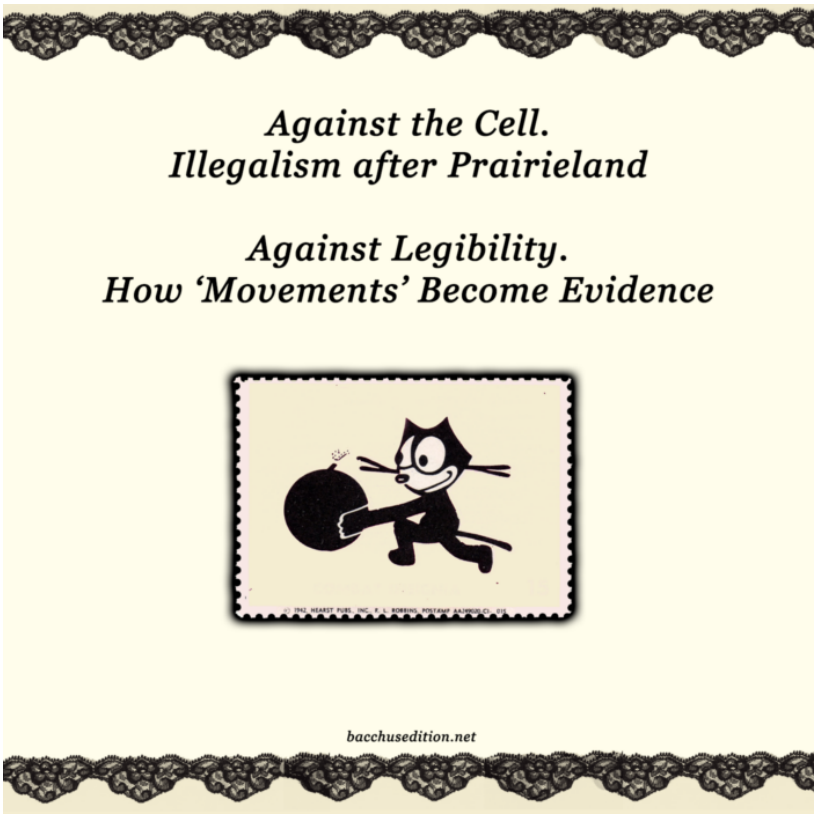

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Recent prosecutions associated with Prairieland and similar cases did not rest upon the discovery of hidden command structures, secret directives, or an underground organization issuing orders from behind the scenes. Prosecutors assembled communications, publications, transportation records, political affiliations, support networks, organizational practices, and ongoing associations between individuals. Signal chats appeared in the record. Vetting procedures appeared in the record. Public events, articles, zines, fundraising efforts, support infrastructure, and statements concerning political activity appeared in the record. Material familiar to nearly anyone active within contemporary anarchist circles entered the courtroom and acquired an entirely different meaning.

Nothing about these materials would have seemed remarkable before they appeared in an indictment. They belonged to the ordinary life of the contemporary anarchist milieu. They facilitated communication, established trust, distributed information, coordinated activity, preserved continuity, and connected individuals to one another across time. Their appearance as evidence feels shocking only if the organizational form itself escapes scrutiny.

The dominant response focuses on *legality.* People rightfully argue that communication is not conspiracy, political identity is not criminality, publications are not terrorism, and association is not proof of wrongdoing. Those arguments are correct. They are also insufficient. Conspiracy prosecutions have always depended upon the conversion of relationships into evidence and upon the conversion of association into liability. Outrage explains neither the mechanism nor its persistence.

Recent indictments reveal something far more interesting than prosecutorial overreach. They reveal the degree to which contemporary movements produce recognizable social bodies. Communications exist. Infrastructure exists. Networks exist. Shared identities exist. Patterns of association exist. Boundaries exist between participants and non-participants. A prosecutor does not begin with a conspiracy and then search for a social body. A prosecutor begins with a social body and constructs a conspiracy from its *visible* features.

What appears in these cases is not a hidden army. What appears is a recognizable milieu.

Before relationships become evidence, before communications become exhibits, and before prosecutors construct narratives of conspiracy, an identifiable social body must already exist. The central problem is not what prosecutors do after discovering such bodies. The central problem is *how those bodies become visible in the first place.*

The Shape of a Conspiracy

Conspiracy law is often imagined as a legal response to secret plans. Popular culture presents conspiracies as hidden organizations, covert meetings, coded instructions, and carefully concealed chains of command. The image persists because it is dramatic and because it flatters the state's preferred story about its own investigations. Reality is frequently much less interesting and much more revealing.

A conspiracy prosecution does not require the discovery of a master plan. It requires the existence of a recognizable *object.* Relationships must be identifiable. Patterns of association must be visible. Participants must be distinguishable from non-participants. Communications, infrastructure, habits, affiliations, and ongoing forms of coordination must be capable of being gathered

together and described as parts of a single thing. The legal arguments come later. The social body comes *first.*

This is why conspiracy prosecutions repeatedly absorb activities that appear unrelated to criminal conduct. Publications become relevant. Public events become relevant. Political identities become relevant. Communication platforms become relevant. Organizational procedures become relevant. Each item contributes little on its own, yet each item assists in drawing the outline of a recognizable form. A conspiracy charge is sustained less by the discovery of a secret and more by the successful description of a shape.

Legibility names the condition under which such a description becomes possible. A social body becomes legible when its boundaries can be traced, its participants identified, its relationships mapped, and its activities assembled into a coherent picture. Once that threshold has been crossed, prosecutors no longer need to invent an organization. An organization already exists in a form that can be pointed to, described, and entered into evidence.

Opacity should not be confused with secrecy. Secrecy concerns information, opacity is about *form.* A person may speak publicly, publish openly, maintain visible relationships, and remain difficult to incorporate into a prosecutable structure. An organization may operate transparently, announce its activities, publish its intentions, and still become highly legible. Visibility and legibility are related, yet they are not identical. The problem is not exposure, the problem is *organization.*

The distinction matters because contemporary discussions of repression almost always focus upon surveillance, infiltration, and concealment. Those concerns are real and they address only part of the process. Before information can be collected, interpreted, and weaponized, a recognizable object must exist for collection to occur. Conspiracy law functions most effectively when it encounters a social body that has already developed names, boundaries, infrastructure, procedures, identities, and enduring patterns of association. At that point the work of description has largely been completed in advance.

The central question raised by recent prosecutions is therefore not how much information the state possesses. The central question concerns the form in which contemporary movements present themselves to the world. *Information becomes evidence only after a recognizable object exists to which that information can be attached.*

The Age of Visibility

Contemporary anarchist practice did not arrive at its present forms by some accident. Many of the organizational habits now treated as common sense emerged in response to real problems. Isolation limited capacity. Distrust destroyed projects. Informal circles dissolved without continuity. Rumor replaced communication. Infiltration produced suspicion. Repression encouraged fragmentation. Public organization, public communication, and visible forms of association developed as *practical* responses to these conditions. Over time those responses became embedded within anarchist culture itself.

Organizations acquired names. Campaigns acquired public identities. Publications developed recognizable audiences. Support networks established permanent structures. Conferences, book fairs, speaking tours, websites, social media accounts, fundraising platforms, and public-facing projects became normal features of movement life. Visibility came to signify seriousness, continu-

ity, and legitimacy. An enduring public presence demonstrated that a project existed beyond the level of private friendship and temporary collaboration. These developments persisted because they solved *practical* problems. They increased coordination, reduced isolation, and preserved continuity.

Every solution, however, altered the shape of the social body itself. Public identities created recognizable constituencies. Organizational continuity created institutional memory. Shared infrastructure connected individuals across campaigns, projects, and geographic regions. Communication platforms preserved relationships that would otherwise have remained temporary. Information became easier to distribute, and relationships became *easier to map.*

None of these developments were irrational. They emerged because they worked. They increased capacity, expanded networks, and reduced isolation. But the same processes that strengthened movements *also* transformed them into increasingly *legible objects.* The qualities that made organizations easier to join, easier to navigate, and easier to sustain also made them easier to identify, describe, and classify.

Visibility and vulnerability developed together. Public campaigns generated public records. Organizational continuity generated institutional traces. Shared identities generated recognizable boundaries. Infrastructure generated documentation. Communication generated archives. The production of visibility and the production of legibility became inseparable processes.

The significance of recent prosecutions lies partly in their exposure of this relationship. Communications, publications, affiliations, support structures, and organizational practices appear as evidence because they already exist as visible components of a recognizable social body. Prosecutors did not create that visibility. They inherited it. Legibility preceded the indictment, and the indictment merely revealed the extent to which the work of description had already been completed.

How Movements Become Evidence

The process by which movements become evidence rarely involves the discovery of hidden information. More often it involves the reinterpretation of information that already exists. Activities understood by participants as ordinary features of collective life acquire a different significance when viewed through the lens of conspiracy law. Relationships remain the same. Communications remain the same. Infrastructure remains the same. The transformation occurs at the level of description.

A Signal channel functions as a means of communication. A prosecutor describes it as a mechanism of coordination. A vetting procedure functions as a method of establishing trust. A prosecutor describes it as evidence of organized membership. A support committee functions as a structure through which assistance is provided to particular individuals. A prosecutor describes it as proof of ongoing association. A publication functions as a vehicle for communication and analysis. A prosecutor describes it as evidence of shared political purpose. The underlying activity remains unchanged. The interpretive framework shifts.

Conspiracy prosecutions derive much of their power from this capacity for translation. Relationships become networks. Networks become structures. Structures become organizations. Organizations become conspiracies. Each step remains intelligible because the preceding step

already exists. Little must be invented. Existing forms acquire new names and new legal significance.

No special insight is required to understand why prosecutors behave in this manner. States classify. Bureaucracies document. Police map relationships. Prosecutors assemble narratives from available material. Conspiracy law exists precisely because direct responsibility often limits the reach of punishment. The ability to transform association into liability expands that reach considerably. A named organization, an identifiable membership, a communication network, a support structure, and a durable public identity present exactly the kind of material such institutions are designed to process.

The more interesting question concerns the organizational assumptions of the contemporary anarchist milieu rather than the prosecutor. A support network may be understood internally as an expression of solidarity and a communication platform may be understood internally as a practical necessity. A public speaking tour may be understood internally as education and a publication may be understood internally as political expression. None of these descriptions are false. They are also not the only descriptions available. Once a recognizable social body exists, every visible feature becomes available for reinterpretation by hostile institutions.

Debates concerning intent rarely reach the center of the problem. Participants may insist that an organization exists for mutual aid, political education, prisoner support, community defense, or any number of legitimate purposes. Prosecutors may insist that the same organization facilitated unlawful activity. Both arguments proceed from a prior fact. An identifiable social body already exists. Participants can be identified. Boundaries can be traced. Relationships can be mapped. Activities can be assembled into a coherent picture.

Legibility becomes decisive at precisely this point. Communications, publications, infrastructure, affiliations, and organizational practices no longer appear as isolated facts. They become components of a single narrative. The indictment does not create the object. The indictment inherits an object that has already acquired a visible form.

Recent prosecutions reveal no hidden genius on the part of the state. They reveal the consequences of presenting institutions of surveillance and prosecution with a social body that has already completed much of the work of describing itself. The remarkable fact is not that prosecutors exploit such conditions, the remarkable fact is *how often movements continue to produce them.*

The Solidarity Response

The dominant response to repression follows a familiar pattern. Arrests occur. Raids occur. Indictments appear. Public statements are issued. Fundraisers are organized. Letter-writing campaigns begin. Defense committees are formed. Prisoner support networks mobilize. Articles appear explaining the significance of the case and urging solidarity with the accused. Recent responses to the Minnesota indictments, Prairieland prosecutions, and similar cases follow this pattern closely.

The practical value of this approach is obvious. Individuals facing prosecution often require substantial assistance. Legal defense is expensive. Imprisonment isolates. Court proceedings consume years. States frequently rely upon exhaustion, fear, and abandonment as instruments of punishment. Financial support, correspondence, public advocacy, and personal loyalty can ma-

terially improve the lives of those subjected to repression. No serious discussion of the subject can ignore these realities.

The problem lies elsewhere.

Nearly every solidarity response begins after identification has already occurred. Names already exist. Relationships have already been mapped. Boundaries have already been drawn. The social body has already become visible enough to be separated from the surrounding population and presented as an object of investigation. The machinery of solidarity enters the picture after the machinery of legibility has already completed its work.

This distinction receives remarkably little attention within contemporary anarchist discourse. Discussions of repression often focus upon how movements should respond once prosecutions begin. Considerably less attention is devoted to the organizational conditions that made such prosecutions possible. Fundraisers address consequences. Defense committees address consequences. Public statements address consequences. Prisoner support addresses consequences. None of these activities necessarily address the production of legibility itself.

The most recent article on the indictments, which my daughter sent me after reading it on Anews, illustrates the prevailing framework clearly. The article argues that the charges are politically motivated, that conspiracy law permits the criminalization of otherwise lawful behavior, and that defendants deserve support and solidarity. The article is correct. Yet the inventory of evidence presented throughout the piece is equally revealing. Signal channels, vetting procedures, public speaking tours, identifiable organizers, political affiliations, and durable organizational relationships all appear as examples of prosecutorial overreach. Yes. And they are also examples of legibility.

The contradiction is rarely acknowledged. The same structures celebrated internally as evidence of strength, continuity, accountability, and collective capacity often become the structures prosecutors rely upon when constructing narratives of conspiracy. Support networks become evidence of association. Organizational continuity becomes evidence of coordination. Public identities become evidence of membership. Communication systems become evidence of collective purpose.

None of this occurs because prosecutors possess unusual insight. It occurs because institutions designed to classify, document, and prosecute hostile populations predictably exploit the materials available to them.

Solidarity addresses the consequences of repression. It does not automatically address the conditions that make repression easier to administer. The distinction matters because contemporary anarchist discourse often treats stronger solidarity as the universal answer to state repression. Stronger solidarity may alleviate suffering after an indictment appears. It does not necessarily explain why the indictment was possible in the first place.

The result is a recurring cycle. Movements become increasingly visible, increasingly organized, and increasingly legible. Prosecutors assemble cases from those conditions. Solidarity networks mobilize in response. Support is provided. Lessons are drawn. Yet the underlying organizational forms frequently remain unchanged. Discussion begins with the indictment and ends with the defense of the indicted. The process through which a recognizable social body became available for identification remains largely unexamined.

What the Illegalists Understood

The illegalists are frequently remembered for the wrong reasons. Popular accounts focus on robberies, shootouts, police chases, and spectacular acts of defiance. Admirers often transform them into romantic outlaws and critics reduce them to reckless criminals. Both approaches obscure the more interesting aspect of the tendency.

Illegalists distrusted causes. They distrusted movements. They distrusted permanent organizations and they distrusted revolutionary identities. They rejected the assumption that individuals should subordinate themselves to enduring collective bodies organized around abstract principles and long-term political programs. Their position is usually interpreted as a moral one. I disagree. It is better understood as a structural critique.

The dominant currents of anarchism increasingly sought durable organizations, identifiable memberships, public platforms, shared doctrines, and collective identities. Illegalists moved in the opposite direction. Relationships existed. Collaborations existed. Affinities existed. Enduring institutional forms attracted far less enthusiasm. The goal was not to construct a permanent social body capable of preserving itself across generations. The goal was to pursue particular desires, projects, and opportunities as they emerged.

The distinction becomes more significant when viewed through the lens of repression. Durable organizations acquire names. Names acquire memberships. Memberships acquire records. Records acquire archives. Archives acquire investigators. Every additional layer of continuity creates another layer of description. A social body that persists over time gradually becomes easier to identify, classify, document, and map.

The illegalists recognized this dynamic and responded to it in their own fashion. Their suspicion of organizations was not merely a rejection of discipline or collective responsibility. It was also a refusal to construct the kinds of durable forms through which states most effectively operate. Governments, parties, unions, churches, corporations, and political organizations all depend upon continuity, administration, representation, and institutional memory. Illegalism displayed little interest in reproducing those same characteristics under anarchist management.

The Bonnot Gang illustrates the point clearly. The state confronted individuals, relationships, and activities rather than a durable public organization. No membership rolls existed. No support committees existed. No organizational infrastructure existed. No enduring collective identity existed that could be expanded into a larger prosecutorial narrative. The state could hunt participants. Building a case around a substantial institutional body proved considerably more difficult because no such body existed.

None of this demonstrates that illegalists solved the problem of repression. No one solved it. States have imprisoned individualists, collectivists, insurrectionists, syndicalists, and every other tendency that crossed their path. The significance of illegalism lies elsewhere. It lies in its refusal to build durable structures merely because political culture expected them to exist. Contemporary anarchist movements often treat organization, visibility, continuity, and institutional growth as self-evident goods. Illegalists approached each of those assumptions with suspicion.

The relevance of that suspicion has little to do with robbery, expropriation, or outlaw mythology. It concerns the relationship between organizational form and legibility. Long before contemporary prosecutors assembled conspiracy cases from communication networks, support structures, publications, and identifiable memberships, illegalists had already reached a simple con-

clusion: every durable collective eventually becomes an object of administration, and every object of administration eventually acquires a file.

Friendship Against Movement

The preceding sections have focused largely upon organizational form. They have examined how social bodies become legible, how legibility becomes evidence, and how evidence becomes prosecution. The discussion naturally raises another question. Why is the dominant collectivist conception of anarchism assumed to be the natural center of gravity in the first place?

Contemporary anarchist discourse often begins from collectivist assumptions and proceeds outward from there. Cooperation, solidarity, mutual aid, defense, friendship, and collective action are routinely discussed as though they emerge from participation in larger social bodies and derive their significance from them. I reject that assumption. Human beings do not require movements, organizations, communities, or causes in order to form relationships, assist one another, defend one another, pursue common projects, or develop loyalties. The collectivist movement is not the source of these capacities. It is one attempt to organize capacities that already exist.

The center of gravity shifts from movements to individuals. Relationships derive their significance from the people involved in them rather than from causes, organizations, identities, or historical missions. People cooperate when they find cooperation desirable. They form projects when projects serve their purposes. They maintain loyalties where loyalties are earned. No higher structure is required to authorize these relationships or grant them legitimacy.

The distinction is significant because relationships and movements operate according to different logics. Movements seek continuity. Movements accumulate infrastructure. Movements preserve identities. Movements reproduce themselves over time. Relationships emerge for particular reasons, pursue particular projects, and disappear when those reasons and projects disappear. One form tends toward permanence. The other tends toward contingency.

A support committee exists because an organization maintains itself as an organization. A friendship exists because particular individuals continue choosing one another. A movement requests allegiance to a collective body. Affinity requests loyalty to specific people. Institutions preserve themselves through continuity. Relationships survive only so long as those involved continue finding value in them.

Abstractions possess a remarkable tendency to acquire interests of their own. The movement, the organization, the community, and the cause gradually become entities requiring preservation, growth, administration, representation, and defense. Individuals increasingly find themselves serving structures originally created to serve them.

Human beings formed relationships, loyalties, friendships, rivalries, partnerships, conspiracies, and mutual obligations long before movements appeared to explain them. The difference lies in where these things begin. Assistance is extended because particular individuals matter, not because an institution claims jurisdiction over one's loyalties. Projects emerge from concrete affinities rather than organizational obligations. Associations exist because participants desire them, not because a structure requires their continuation.

No organizational form eliminates repression. States pursue friendships when friendships become threatening. States pursue informal networks when informal networks become effective. The question concerns tendencies rather than guarantees. Temporary projects leave fewer traces

than permanent institutions. Chosen relationships produce fewer administrative demands than enduring organizations. Affinity without identity creates different vulnerabilities than identity supported by infrastructure, continuity, and representation.

The significance of this perspective lies in where it begins. Contemporary anarchist discourse often starts with movements and asks how individuals fit within them. I begin from the opposite direction. Individuals come first. The value of any relationship, project, or association emerges from the people involved and not from the abstract body formed around them.

What Is Owed

Nothing in this argument requires indifference toward those facing prosecution. States isolate because isolation works. Legal proceedings consume years. Imprisonment severs relationships, exhausts resources, and gradually reduces individuals to case numbers and administrative files. Refusing that process remains worthwhile.

People can write letters. They can send money. They can visit prisoners. They can testify, organize legal support, assist families, and stand beside those they have chosen not to abandon. None of these acts require belief in movements as such. They require loyalty, memory, affection, friendship, and the refusal to allow institutions to determine the limits of one's obligations.

The distinction matters because support and identification are not the same thing. The dominant response to repression often treats them as though they were inseparable. A recognizable social body is identified, mapped, and targeted. Solidarity then mobilizes in response. The sequence feels so natural that it rarely attracts attention.

The preceding sections have examined a different question. They have not asked how individuals should be treated once they have been identified, mapped, isolated, and prosecuted by a predatory state. They have asked how that process of identification occurs in the first place.

States will continue behaving as states. Police will continue mapping relationships. Prosecutors will continue assembling narratives from communications, affiliations, infrastructure, and association. Nothing discussed here alters those realities. The issue concerns the forms through which anarchists choose to relate to one another and the assumptions they carry about organization, visibility, continuity, and collective identity.

The anarchist response to repression almost always begins after the prosecutor has already identified the target. What would an anarchism look like that asked how the target became identifiable in the first place?

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