An Enduring Passion For Criminality

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Introductions

Anarchist discussions of illegalism become confused when it is defined in relief; “if the law is a criminal imposition by the ruling class, criminals are truly revolutionary regardless of their actions” they say. Such a definition leads to idiotic floundering to find a place in the revolutionary for notorious criminals. Yet even the most dedicatedly nihilist anarchist would balk at seeing the perpetrator of the Montreal Massacre, a misogynist with an utterly incompatible vision of the future, as a comrade or as being of the same class or category. Rehabilitating certain anarchist propaganda of the deed causes further problems, as it relies on the stale moralism of accepting certain crimes (theft, forgery, counterfeiting, fraud) while decrying others (acts of brutality, property destruction and murder). An illegalist declaring alliances merely creates a false dualism between the “good” criminal, who identifies sites of oppression that they lash out at, versus the “confused” or “bad” criminal, whom works against the interests of their class or others. It is through this prism that we discuss the infamous Bonnot Gang & the Russian Nihilists, groups that engaged in “campaigns” of robbery & assassination, and are celebrated for their refusal of respectability in order to wage war on the state.

Celebration of criminality are not new to the anarchist project. Also age-old is its adversary: “moderate” voices that dismiss the long history of violent (and often criminal) resistance. General historical accounts of Anarchism, an exemplar of which is Black Flame, choose to focus on more conventional (largely union-based) attempts to seize power from the capitalist class. This often leaves anarchists with a simplistic dichotomy between “adventurists” and a “true” anarchism that organizes working-class interests to seize power over the economic sphere through something like a union. This simplistic dichotomy ignores the way in which the working class has often been quite enamored with criminal resistance (cf. E. P. Thompson’s Making of the English Working Class, or even James C. Scott’s Domination and the Arts of Resistance). Numerous histories of working class revolt demonstrate the centrality of criminal resistance and not simply adventurist game play by disaffected bourgeoisie. Criminality has been an equally as important in anarchist history. The most notable examples are Stirnerite Individualists, the “Bonnot Gang” and Russian Nihilists, such as Sergey Nechayev. Rather than defanging such movements by presenting them in palatable terms, something to which these revolu-

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*Revolutionaries always pay their parking tickets*

— William Haver
treat law as an emperor without clothes; it need not be denuded, delegalized, or publicly flogged. The illegalist tradition of hostility does not even posit the possibility of banditry, the valorization of transgression, or the fetishizing of the illegal act. The history of hostility is the successive development of a structure of action that amplifies the crisis in policing itself, by causing ruptures in logistics on a material level. The materialist core of illegalism is not a declaration of the illegal or the fusion of concepts against law. The revolutionary premise of illegalism is that it takes an absolute material hostility toward the logistics of law, policing, as its point of departure. Illegalism should then be understood as a degree - the degree to which criminality manifests through hostility towards the operation of law. Seen from such a perspective, illegalism is not a reaction to law as a conceptual universality or even the existence of the theory of law. In other words, illegalism becomes dematerialized when taken as an ethical injunction, whose anemic existence is the pathetic life of a conceptual parable: imposing moral law in the attempt to combat the concept of law. The enduring passion of illegalism thrives as a form of insurgency, as a term that marks the space of active hostility toward the operation of the logistics of policing. This hostility grows in particular moments, within particular dynamics, and as such, generates an illegalism that can only be understood strategically - as a strategy through which immediate and material hostility manifests, with a criminality of the tendency toward direct confrontation with policing, and without an ethical injunction against any possible actions.

What occurs in the form of actions of the Bonnot Gang and the Russian Nihilists is not a process in which actions are not taken due to their illegality. Rather, something much more important is functioning in this process: they dispute the legitimacy of law as a conceptual framework. These illegalists launched a material attack on the operationality of law as such. They took aim at the structure and function of policing as logistics. Rather than following an ethical injunction whereby one is compelled to take actions defined through the sovereignty of the state, even if those actions are intended to be contrary to the law. Rather, illegalism becomes an im-

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Matterialist Illegalism

The Bonnot Gang is perhaps the penultimate example of the criminal tendency within Individualist (specifically Stirnerite) Anarchism, both because of their historical notability and their successes. These are interrelated facts of the gang, however, as the Bonnot Gang would not be notable were it not for their innovations in the field of bank robbery, which nat-

We would like to address the arguments constructed by those with which we find affinity. Addressing only those involves a choice not to discuss the absurdity of a discourse on responsibility. This is because we have no interest in engaging the problem of anarcho-moralism or prefigurative concepts of strategy that substitute performance for actual engagement. We leave these issues to platformists and organizations such as Deep Green Resistance. This discussion is instead among those with which we do find points of convergence: those who operate within a tradition whose acts are primarily illegal. For this tradition, illegality is not a means to a political end, an inconvenient byproduct of being radical, or a risk to be faced when being confrontational. Illegalists live criminality as a way of life.

There is a certain symbolic element introduced to conversations of illegality that is, for lack of a better term, activism. Activism misrecognizes the actions of illegalists as a symbolic protest against law. Illegalism in this portrayal exists only as a reaction to law itself, as a codified structure, and thus misses the material dynamics of the operation of law. The generic concept of law is without fixed content and only become meaningful through codification and police logistics. Resisting the hollow content of the state is for those who define all existence conceptually; those who live by nothing but a conceptual form of political positivism. These positivists dream of living on the limits of existence, but in fact only practice a form of ethical absolutism; their basic injunction is that law must always already be violated with every breath and with every beat of the heart otherwise illegalism becomes reduced to nothing but an intention to break the law. In this form, illegalism offers nothing more than a strongly-worded critique that everybody knows but no one reads; limiting illegalism to this obliterates everything interesting and useful about criminality. To begin the grasp the dangerous core of illegalism once again, the volatility contained within the tradition, requires us to re-evaluate the dynamic of the actions taken by the those identified with the tradition.
ural lead to their successes. Firstly, the Bonnot Gang utilized getaway vehicles when the police were still primarily moving about on foot, given them the ability to spirit themselves away from the scene of the crime and then disappear (from the eyes of the police at least) into the anarchist underground of the time. The Gang also initiated a conceptual shift in policing with regards to their utilization of firepower; the Bonnot Gang like many individualist anarchists of their time carried about and used the readily available Browning High Power 9mm pistol, a weapon that had significantly higher rate of fire and magazine capacity than the revolvers used by the French police. Because of these factors, and the rather daring robberies that it allowed them to pull off before their eventual trial and execution (for the members who did not die in shoot outs with the police) the Bonnot Gang also struck a chord with their contemporaries becoming notable historical figures. For the bourgeois who condemned them, and whose condemnations lead to their notoriety outside of the anarchist milieu, the Bonnot Gang represented a complete breakdown of the social order, working class youth armed with high quality weapons robbing banks and breaking into the houses of the rich to make off with their property. The anarchist milieu, on the other hand, was split over whether the Bonnot Gang was a pure expression of individualist anarchism or simply a pointless lashing out, regardless of how legitimate the targets were.

One of the problems of the fairly histrionic response to the gang whether supportive or derisive, is that the Bonnot Gang itself has become a semi-mythical group, often confusingly viewed as Nietzschean Ubermensch rather than human beings. The Bonnot Gang “were not at all extraordinary people or anarchist supermen,” Richard Parry notes in The Bonnot Gang that we should neither gloss over their exploits nor “glamorize or make heroes” of them. What is extraordinary about the Gang is not that they were criminals, as plenty of working class engaged in bank robberies that it allowed them to pull off before their eventual trial and execution (for the members who did not die in shoot outs with the police) the Bonnot Gang was a pure expression of individualist anarchism or simple a pointless lashing out, regardless of how legitimate the targets were.

1. The slogan of Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers
tion. Thus, while their actions are (historically) unceremoniously shoved over the dividing line into “bad” criminal behavior (especially given their almost pathological lack of concern for bystanders), what should be evaluated is the efficacy with which they carried out their task.

Criminality As Hostility

There is a distinction between crime and criminality. This distinction does not appear in the frame that takes actions in violation of the law as its fundamental distinction. To frame the totality of the illegalist tradition in this light is to view illegalism from the perspective of its other; beginning with what others will determine, from some removed administrative point of view, to be illegal; to be criminal; to be in violation. The common reading of illegalism in the contemporary insurrectionist nihilist milieu oddly combines this notion of the illegal with two others: an isolating individualism that follows from a concept of the individual as a site of inscription for all possible dynamics and meaning; and a strange ethical politics based in the injunction to always already take illegal actions. Illegalism here becomes discussed as an odd form of political Kantianism as framed through a concept of egoism wherein the actions of an isolated individual is inscribed with an administrative connotation that is attached to an ethical injunction. That individual actions take on value to the degree that they become distinct from the actions of others but also, in an inversion of Kant’s ethical imperative; to the degree that the individual exists in violation of this conceptual outside of the law. In individualism’s fight to eliminate conceptual spectres (to borrow a term from Stirner), the ethical injunction to act illegally reinscribes legality as the individualist self, as the monastic agent, is defined first through their closeness to conceptual statism and only secondarily finds value according to the distance they are able to create from it.

The consequence of an ethical opposition to the concept of the state, is radical monism. Locking power and resistance together, it is a complete rejection of the outside of desire. This speculative criminality is thus ironically thoughtless, forever damned to a futurity beyond immediate desire, always looking over their shoulder to act in relation to an enemy. As such, desire is falsely understood as operating completely within in a framework of the self. The ethical injunction to always already act illegally thus form an obtuse illegalism unaware of strategy, the materiality of the state, and the function of the police. Just as in Kantianism, the actions of this blundering illegalism are isolated from their dynamics, for they are expressed conceptually and deemed relevant to the degree that their conceptual definition is expressed through the medium of immediate action.

In essence, there was widespread intellectual approval for the actions of the Bonnot Gang within the Stirnerite tradition — and it was expressed in widely-read arguments in a proletarian paper. Truly remarkable is the milieu in which the Bonnot Gang acted, for it reflects a generalized rejection of authority; rebuffing policemen and union stewards alike.

Despite the power of this milieu and the commendable bravery of the Bonnot Gang, many histories of illegalism fall into the ideological trap of separating ‘real’ criminals from political ones. Parry, for instance, argues that the accomplishments of the Bonnot Gang “took precedence over that of a banker,” whose crimes should be duly condemned because he had “embezzled no less than one million francs - two hundred times as much as the illegalists had gotten away with.” Although such sideline adjudication is far from rare, it is unsavory. However, a larger problem rears its head in the tendency to read the actions of the Bonnot Gang as symbolic (albeit more effective) protest. To clarify, what we are talking about is the tendency to see the Bonnot Gang robbing both banks and wealthy industrialists as an expression of protest against either banks or industrialists. While the Gang was certainly not in favor of the exploitation of the working class by either of these institutions, it was not their intent to be criminals as a form of social banditry, to borrow Habsbawm’s term, that acted as symbolic protest against the current order, but rather they were criminals to fulfill their individualist desires (food, good clothing, and a good life) which for them was a form of resistance, even if only through Stirnerite logic. Part of the mythologizing of the Bonnot Gang as social bandits comes from the tendency to read revolutionary impulses into any person getting a leg up on the bosses. As Woody Guthrie adroitly notes, there are plenty of folk songs about bandits and outlaws, yet no working class person has ever penned a song about the greatness of their banker, landlord, or boss. It is, however tempting, unfair to view the actions of the Bonnot Gang as symbolic (although that is certainly the way in which they resonate) rather than tactical. That is, the Gang accomplished their robberies because they were engaged in planning and choosing to strike where the money is (banks and wealthy industrialists), it is a corollary to this that they were symbolically humiliating the bosses. In fact, one of the reasons opinions within the Individualist Anarchist movement of the time were so divided on the Bonnot Gang was their decision to shoot a bank courier who would not hand over his package of money as he was certain-

2. Their individualist arguments are not even particularly noteworthy, one can find similar argumentation offered on almost any insurrectionist’s bookshelf, even if it is presented in a slightly more contemporary argot.
ly a member of the working class, even if the Bonnot Gang rightly termed him an exceptionally stupid one. In this sense, the crimes of the Bonnot Gang were tactical ones (even if their aim was simply self-gratification, a revolutionary act by their own credo) rather than symbolic.

Contrary to the tactical selfishness of the Bonnot Gang, the Russian Nihilists spectacular (and therefore inherently if not intentionally symbolic) campaign of terror was a tactical one completely obsessed with the eradication of the Tsarist state. Before going into the the particularities of the Russian Nihilists it is worth noting that this is partly because Russian Nihilism, as espoused by Sergei Nechayev is a paradoxically selfish ideology. That is, according to Nechayev the “revolutionary is a doomed man” with “no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name” because “everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution.”

Because of the suicidal nature of many attacks and the secretiveness of those that were capable of carrying out multiple attacks, Russian Nihilism does not give us individual figures like the Bonnot Gang. However, the Russian Nihilists pursued their campaign of high profile killings of representatives of the Tsarists state (whether high or low ranking) with a single minded devotion that bordered on fanaticism. While the havoc spread by the Nihilists from roughly 1894 to 1917 was indeed spectacular (and thus as a corollary symbolic) especially given the explosive end they visited on a number of state functionaries, this was immaterial to their actual aim to completely eradicate the Tsarists regime (although the symbolic nature of their violence was certainly helpful in spreading unrest and terror.)

It is worth, at least noting, that there was no formal organization of Russian Nihilism and almost every revolutionary organization to some extent engaged in expropriation and assassination. However, as a tendency Russian Nihilism is an enduring expression of a particular set of principles exacerbated by the situation in Russia in the pre-revolutionary period. Specifically, the Tsarists state was in crisis on almost every front (including military strikes, workers barricades, peasants killing landowners and non-Russian ethno-nationalists attempting to cede from the Russian state); it was exceptionally difficult for the state to administer order. Furthermore the crisis was the near ubiquitous nature of bomb making materials; making the task of preventing terrorist “outrages” a Sisyphean task. The prevalence of bombs as an assassins’ tool was so common that the Russian lexicon began to reflect it, for example the adage that “luck is like a bomb- it can strike one man today, another tomorrow” or the joke that the Minister of Finance had “decided to replace gold currency with dynamite, since dynamite is streaming into Russia while gold is streaming out.” The scale of violence against state functionaries was almost unimaginable; in 1905 alone, 3,611 government officials of all ranks were killed. It is probably without irony that one official remarked “one is surprised they have not yet killed all of us” given the nearly daily assassinations. One of the reasons that violence became so effective, however, is directly traceable to the avowed amoralism of figureheads like Neychev, specifically assassins no longer solely targeted high profile and particularly odious members of the regime; rather all public officials were considered acceptable targets as were their families. In one case a socialist group assassinated a police informant’s father so they could kill him, their actual target, at his father’s funeral. This amplification of violence, by widening the range of acceptable targets; combined with readily available bomb making materials; and the chaos throughout Russia as a whole allowed terrorism to become “both the catalyst for and the result of Russia’s internal crisis.” On the other hand individual assassination attacks and expropriations played a primary role in undermining the political and economic stability of the tsarist regime, inhibiting its efforts to wage an effective anti-revolutionary war. On the other, terrorism allowed to assume enormous proportions only as a consequence of a whole complex of revolutionary events in Russia. The Nihilists, as a tendency rather than a uniform movement, were able to practice their ideology only because of the conditions of in Russia, however their wanton attacks on government officials (including acts as small scale as walking about with sulfuric acid and throwing it in the face of the first policeman they encountered, and as large as a grenade attacks on highly ranked government Ministers) helped exacerbate the conditions which allowed them to practice their ideology in the first place.

Underlying these spectacular attacks was a consistent tactical ideology. While Russian Nihilists never exerted the charismatic historiography of criminals such as the Bonnot Gang, Anna Geifman’s Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia 1894 - 1917 can scarcely contain its distaste for the architects of these attacks, they were criminals, whose choice of crimes (assassinations, maiming, extortion, expropriation) was consistently aimed at destabilizing the Tsarist regime, and although there was a strong symbolism to dynamite obliterating a state functionary, their intention was not notoriety of the symbolic nature of such an ac-

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3. He was also an ardent supporter of bomb-making, stating that one chemist was worth twelve poets.