Introduction
Blasting the Canon

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This issue was inspired by Süreyyya Evren's doctoral research into postanarchism and the conversations that resulted from it about the construction of the anarchist past, the theoretical integrity of 'classical anarchism'—particularly as it is understood in postanarchist writings—and the nature of anarchist history.[1]

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[1] Süreyya Turkeli, "What is Anarchism? A Reflection on the Canon and The Constructive Potential of Its Destruction," PhD diss. (Loughborough University, 2012).

The questions that this research raised were less about the persuasiveness of postanarchist treatments of nineteenth-century anarchists, which had already been explored in some detail, than about the ways in which the tradition of classical anarchism was constructed in postanarchist critique. Not only did it appear that this construction failed to capture complexity, fluidity, and creativity of anarchist practices, it also seemed that it contributed to the reification of a highly partial reading of nineteenth century traditions. The canon was central to this analysis, because the notion that there was a 'classical' tradition already assumed that 'anarchism' might be defined by the writings of a narrow range of writers—typically, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin—and by an equally narrow selection of texts, theorised in a particular manner, using frameworks of analysis that were inherently distorting. The anarchist canon emerged from the analysis of a tradition scrutinised by philosophers who found anarchism wanting and by sympathetic historians who adopted highly personalised accounts of anarchist thought (Tolstoy: 'The Prophet'; Bakunin: 'The Destructive Urge').[2]

Paul Eltzbacher's work[3] provided a useful starting point for the discussion, not because his account of the seven sages of anarchism was particularly well known (on the contrary, it's a classic that few now read), but because of the influence it exercised at the time it was written (1911) and, perhaps, structurally, on subsequent works, notably Woodcock's *Anarchism*.[4] Eltzbacher's legalistic approach is difficult to love: Gustav Landauer believed that it missed entirely anarchism's 'unspeakable mood.'[5] Yet it is also misunderstood. Marie Fleming argued that Eltzbacher's analysis of anarchism as anti-statism was reductive and that anarchism could only be understood contextually: as a movement that emerged 'in response to specific social-economic grievances in given historical circumstances.'[6]

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[2] For a discussion of anarchism and analytic philosophy see Benjamin Franks, "Anarchism and Analytic Philosophy," in Ruth Kinna, ed., *Continuum Companion to Anarchism* (London: Continuum, 2012), 53–74.

[3] Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism: Seven Exponents of the Anarchist Philosophy* (London: Freedom, 1960); available at Project Gutenburg: http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36690.

[4] George Woodcock, *Anarchism A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (New York: Meridian Books, 1962).

[5] Gustav Landauer to Paul Eltzbacher, April 2, 1900, in Gustav Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Sampler*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 303.

[6] Marie Fleming, *The Odyssey of Elisée Reclus: The Geography of Freedom*

Her view not only emphasised anarchism's European origin but perhaps attributed to Eltzbacher an ambition not his own. As Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt argue, Eltzbacher's aim was to understand anarchism *ideologically* ('scientifically,' to use his terminology) and to try to discover the common threads that made sense of the application of the label 'anarchist' to the set of writers who were already commonly identified with this epithet.[7] If his work helped establish a particular definition of anarchism and tie this definition tightly to a canon, his concern was to bring clarity to ideas that were not well understood.[8] And however faulty his framework, (van der Walt outlines what he sees as the shortcomings in his contribution) Eltzbacher rejected the idea that anarchists must necessarily be sub-divided into irreconcilable schools, an approach pioneered by other early analysts like Ernst Zenker,[9] and he recognised that a full understanding of anarchism depended on a familiarity with an international movement and with a body of literatures, typically circulating in newspapers, often authored anonymously.

One of the objections to the approach Eltzbacher pioneered is that it failed to provide an intelligible account of anarchist politics. Indeed, described as anti-statism, anarchism appears compatible with multiple currents of thought, including neo-liberal strains that socialist anarchists flatly reject. For Kropotkin, who applauded Eltzbacher's efforts to provide an intellectually rigorous analysis of anarchism, anarchism referred to a set of practices rather than an ideology. He attempted to describe these by probing the affinities between the nineteenth-century groups he was involved with and a diverse set of popular movements, cultural currents, thinkers, and events.[10] This analysis was itself a political act, part of an effort to normalise anarchist ideas by demonstrating the principles that anarchists espoused had a popular root, and, at the same time, a contribution to a struggle with social democracy that was designed to show that socialism

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(Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1988), 23.

[7] Michael Schmidt & Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, *Vol. 1: Counter-Power* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 17–18, 35–45.

[8] Eltzbacher, *Anarchism*, 1.

[9] Ernst Victor Zenker, *Anarchism; a Criticism and History of the Anarchist Theory* (London & New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1897).

[10] Peter Kropotkin, 'Anarchism,' in R.N. Baldwin, ed., *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York: Dover, 1972), 283–300.

and socialist transformation might take different forms to those prescribed by the then dominant party machines. This approach enabled him to show that it was possible to think about anarchism as a distinctive strand within the revolutionary socialist movement and to assert the superiority of particular adjectival forms (as the best vehicles for realising popular aspirations) without imposing rigid theoretical, disciplinary, cultural, or temporal boundaries on the ideas and practices that fell within it. Similarly, it enabled him to acknowledge that anarchist ideas were not especially nor fundamentally European and to identify a host of anarchistic practices without relinquishing the notion that anarchism described a distinctive politics and a normative, ethical stance.

Eltzbacher's identification of the seven sages has undoubtedly contributed to canonical thinking and to the perception that anarchism might be defined exclusively with reference to the ideas of a few great men. Introductions to anarchism often survey selected figures, sometimes explicitly prioritising ideas, sometimes contextualising them in historical movements, and not unusually divorcing the theory from the practice. It's easy to dismiss everything about the canon, yet before rejecting it altogether it seems important to consider what precisely we are blasting, when we blast it. Even Wyndham Lewis, in his most fearsome attack, coupled blast with blessing.[11] It seems from the unscientific survey conducted for this issue that respondents feel similarly. The results suggest that the idea of a theoretical tradition continues to resonate, albeit for an unrepresentative and (of course!) statistically insignificant sample. And it's interesting to find that of Eltzbacher's seven sages (Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon, Tucker, Stirner, Tolstoy, and Godwin), the first-named three are still ranked in the top slots one hundred years after he devised his list. Does it follow from these results that the idea of a canon is integral to anarchist conceptions of anarchism? The selection criteria used by participants and the commentaries on the selections, as well as the selections themselves, suggest that this is not the case; that there is a good deal of disagreement about what anarchism might mean, even within the confines of 'classical' thought; and that an appreciation or interest in

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[11] Wyndham Lewis, *Blast 2* (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head, July 1915), 94–95; available at the Modernist Journals Project: http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=1144595337105481&view=mjp_object.

anarchist thinking is entirely compatible with critique and active engagement.

The contributors to this issue suggest a number of different purposes for blasting the canon. For Michelle Campbell, the inspiration is to allow more voices in—her choice is Voltairine de Cleyre, a notable exponent of anarchism without adjectives; Elmo Feiten's blast is directed at canonical construction and focuses on Max Stirner, a bugbear of recent canon-builders and, as Feiten argues, a spook even in sympathetic accounts of his work. James Miller examines the significance of the prefixes that attach to terms and the political, social, and activist identities they create. Nathan Jun and Robert Graham both attempt to blast what they see as the static or programmatic and authoritative ordering of anarchist voices: this is the focus of their critique of Lucien van der Walt. For his part, van der Walt suggests that their resistance is fraught with difficulty: blasting one canon usually results in the creation of an alternative, rather than the rejection of canons themselves. Yet as Leonard Williams argues, the process of selections does not necessarily lead to definitive choice. Distinguishing between theory and the practice of canon-building, he defends the practice of 're-presenting' the 'ideas, values, and spirit found within anarchism' and blasts only the 'prescriptive conditions for admission to the club.' A history of underground literatures, handwritten, typed, mimeographed, which reproduce images, extracts from poetry, songs, literature, and political thought, all lovingly chosen to propagate anarchist ideas, underwrites his account.

The role of history in canonical thinking is tackled by Matthew Adams. His blast is against canonical approaches that treat the past as something to be surpassed, and he shows how an appreciation of historical context and the conditions in which anarchists operated help us think productively about their attempts to articulate a distinctive anarchist culture. Canonical figures are not written out of history, but they no longer play a representational role. In history, canonical thinking tends towards the deployment of discrete categories, the invention of useful shortcuts for critique. However, as Jim Donaghey also argues, it is possible to develop non-canonical approaches. In his analysis of anarchism and punk, the alternative he proposes is rooted in the embrace of antimony, tension, and overlap. Ryan Knight's essay touches on similar themes but makes the point through textual interpretation, contrasting small-'a' treatments of Bakunin to Bakunin's writings. What emerges is not a canonical,

big-'A' Bakunin, but a Bakunin who looks remarkably like the small-'a' anarchists who define themselves in opposition. To blast the canon, in this way, is to open a dialogue and invite discussion of continuities, not with a view to advancing positions on the past, but as Mümken proposes in his interview with Gabriel Kuhn, to 'reflect on the social transformations, theoretical developments, and practical experiences of the last decades.'