

This Canon Which Is Not One

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ABSTRACT

Thinking about an anarchist canon focuses on a number of issues: whether or not such a canon exists; questions of identity and boundary maintenance; concerns about representation. This essay addresses these questions by exploring not only what *constitutes* a canon, but also how one *emerges* and what *purposes* it might serve. We generally turn to a canon as an aid for either understanding or changing the world before us. Anarchist canons thus develop not only around texts and theorists, but also around events and practices—yet, no canon can claim universality; each one is inherently limited and skewed. How then can we avoid the dangers posed by a reified canon? These risks can be mitigated, initially, by regarding a canon as a tool kit enabling us to understand the tradition and gain some leverage for contributing to it. Second, we can subject any canon that does emerge to questioning and challenge. A third approach is to pay attention to activists' concerns and the cultural products that reflect on their practices. Finally, whenever we encounter an established canon, we must test its worth by assessing whether or not it speaks to our condition.

KEYWORDS

canon, tradition, representation, anarchism, theory, practice

In an often-cited passage, David Graeber (2004: 3) notes that, in many accounts, anarchism has been treated as a set of ideas basically similar to Marxism. In other words, “anarchism is

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presented as the brainchild of certain nineteenth-century thinkers—Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, etc.—it then went on to inspire working-class organizations, became enmeshed in political struggles, divided into sects.” This similarity to Marxism, especially its academic variant, also extends to the apparent establishment and persistence of a canon of classic works. Indeed, Süreyya Evren has observed that it is common for reference books on anarchism to start with an exposition of key theorists and conclude with a discussion of the practical applications of their theories. If, however, “anarchist practices are a form of thinking: a thinking on freedom, equality, solidarity, action,” then “anarchist political philosophy can’t be understood by referring to representative thinkers only, it requires analysis of the common points of this elusive complex network of radicalisms and resistances” (Alpine Anarchist Productions 2010).

When *Anarchist News* (“The Anarchist Canon Is” 2010) asked for opinions on the anarchist canon, the comments revealed an equally elusive and complex network of responses. Some comments presented lists of key anarchist thinkers; others voiced objections to those named on the lists, saying that some of the figures mentioned were not even anarchist at all. Still other comments expressed (more or less vulgarly) the thought that the whole enterprise was worthless. Thinking about the existence, form, and significance of an anarchist canon thus raises a number of issues. One issue is whether or not a canon actually exists. Another issue involves questions of identity and boundary maintenance: Who is and who is not an anarchist? What is and what is not anarchist in spirit? Still another issue addresses Graeber’s and Evren’s significant concerns about representation: whether or not an institutionalized, fixed, or reified anarchist canon privileges certain texts and perspectives over, and to the exclusion of, others.

Before proceeding further, we must first decide what constitutes a canon. Without belaboring the point, we can understand a canon as a list of authors or books that one should read in order to be knowledgeable about, or answer questions about, a particular domain of experience. We can see canonical influences evident in some of the anthologies of anarchist writings. For example, the editor of one anthology (containing writings that stretch from those by Godwin and Stirner to ones by Cohn-Bendit and Goodman) audaciously asserted that what “anarchists have actually said and done in respect to specific economic, social, and political issues is best learned from the texts contained in this book” (Shatz 1971: xi). More modestly, Daniel Guérin (2005: 3),

though he intended not to beatify anyone, nevertheless saw fit to begin his anthology with works what he called the “pioneers”—namely Stirner, Proudhon, and Bakunin.

Commonly understood, then, the canon of classic works in the anarchist tradition certainly would include those by Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, supplemented perhaps with those by Goldman, Malatesta, Landauer, or any number of other famous names. More recent additions to such a list might include works by folks like Ward, Bookchin, or Chomsky. Like all canons, though, this particular list of authors and texts is highly selective and limited in coverage; inherently, no canon can be truly comprehensive—which is one of the reasons why the presence of any canon is problematic.

There is some debate, though, about whether or not an anarchist canon actually exists. In making the case for a post-anarchism, for instance, thinkers such as Saul Newman (2010) have criticized classical anarchism—embodied in the works of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin—for its Enlightenment orientation and essentialism. In challenging such claims, Nathan Jun (2012) has replied that “classical anarchism” was a fiction. His claim was that no common, coherent perspective can be found among the ideas of these supposedly classical anarchists. Evren (2008) similarly quarreled with assertions about classical anarchism in noting that, in order to be supported or even fully understood, they first required the construction of a critical genealogy of the anarchist “canon.”

Further, one can point to some recent introductions to anarchism that abjure a focus on particular thinkers and instead prefer to focus on movements and values—works by Colin Ward (2004) and Cindy Millstein (2010) are notable in this regard. For such writers, conceiving of anarchism as a set of classic works is highly problematic. Even though nineteenth-century canonical works may have marked the beginning of the tradition, “an isolated philosophical reading of Anarchist ‘classics’” cannot give one an accurate picture of anarchism that is best conceived as “a creed that has been worked out in action” (Meltzer 1996: 13, 17). In this context, anarchists are linked not by common authors or texts, but by the common themes underlying their social and political practices. Randall Amster (2012) agrees, but then further confuses matters by using the term “canon” to refer not to a set of authors or texts, but to these common themes or values that anarchists have embraced in practice. Given that anarchists themselves have used the term in different ways and have taken multiple stances on the question of a canon, let us shift gears

from determining what *constitutes* a canon to understanding what *purposes* a canon might serve.

Although the construction of any particular canon is a significant and complex historical question, any anarchist canon (to the extent that one exists) would offer the elements of an answer to this sort of question: *What is anarchism all about?* Certainly, people who self-identify as anarchists have to answer this question in face-to-face conversations with some frequency. Yet, there are limits to the educative value that these conversations might have—if only because anarchism itself is a non-creedal, non-authoritarian perspective. As we are often reminded, anarchism is not a fully specified, ideological doctrine; it advocates no universal program or authoritative set of principles. Every program or principle that may be presented always seems to be subject to critique and exception. Any one person's take on anarchism seems to be just that—an idiosyncratic understanding of what constitutes anarchism or a personal assessment of its worth.

In taking the discussion of anarchism beyond one's particular horizons, or if a person wanted to be modest in one's pronouncements about anarchism, she or he might end up saying something like: *This is what I think anarchism is all about, but if you want to know more, here are some books (or pamphlets, zines, films, CDs, websites, and the like) that have helped me understand it. Perhaps they can help you understand anarchism.* Even in this modest version, the participants in the dialogue (knowingly or not) are gesturing toward a broader understanding of the anarchist tradition. They do so by ruling some works to be within the tradition and others to be outside it, and those that are within the tradition necessarily bear some relationship to canonical works and conceptions. Thus, as John Dunn (1996) suggested with regard to the history of political thought, a canon itself serves as a cognitive resource for understanding a given domain or tradition. In sum, any reference to a canon provides the curious person with a ready orientation to a particular world, with a more or less reliable map of a given territory.

We can also understand a canon in a Wittgensteinian (1958) fashion. From this point of view, a canon would function something like a tool kit. Canonical works would give one a vocabulary for talking about anarchism, as well as a sense of its basic values and concerns. One draws on this vocabulary in making sense of anarchism when the topic comes up, or in commenting on certain social and political events. Using canonical authors or texts as shorthand forms of communication,

it becomes possible for one to connect with like-minded people. Hence, immersing oneself in a canon is also like learning a language game, enabling one to function in a particular milieu. Familiarity with a canon (whether conceived as the source of a tradition or as the distillate of one) brings one into a community, helps one enter a form of life. Further, becoming versed in a canon is also like learning how to count; it enables one to carry on. One can take additional steps in learning about the tradition, passing its lessons and values on to others, and even making one's own contributions to it.

Thinking about an anarchist canon in this way makes the canon a means by which a community establishes its boundaries, that is, proclaims or asserts its identity. For a tradition and community as diverse as anarchism, though, it would be wrong to try to establish permanent boundaries or markers. It may well be helpful to think that there are multiple canons within a broadly conceived anarchist "tradition"—individual canons either existing in isolation or in intersecting webs (Jun 2012: 134). For example, it makes sense to believe that there are different canonical works for social ecologists and for primitivists. Their respective canons would diverge (including Bookchin rather than Zerzan, for example, and vice versa), to be sure, but they might also intersect a bit (e.g., adding Mumford), even as their respective interpretations of intersecting works would undoubtedly vary. A canon might thus be seen as the textual or intellectual equivalent of an affinity group. It can even function as part of a tactical formation in a demonstration (Winston 2011; "A Book Bloc's Genealogy" 2012). Even so, recognizing diversity and multiplicity does not mean that we have rejected the very idea of a canon or caused any particular canon (of thinkers or texts) to disappear. For instance, Albert Meltzer, a critic of academic approaches to understanding anarchism, took care to cite Godwin, Proudhon, and Hegel as anarchism's philosophical precursors, and then went on to detail what he saw as anarchism's specific tenets and values. In doing so, he further noted that three important lines of theory and practice stemmed from Godwin, only one of which led to a revolutionary "'mainstream' Anarchism [that] was coherent and united, and was given body by the writings of a number of theoreticians such as Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Luigi Galleani, and others" (Meltzer 1996: 17).

As the general issue of an anarchist canon percolates among scholars and activists, I have found it helpful to think about it partly through the lens of a similar, longstanding debate within academic political theory. The study of political theory,

particularly within departments of political science, has long been identified with the study of canonical texts in Western political thought—what John Gunnell (1979) labeled the Tradition. Conceived as a series of classic works extending “from Plato to NATO,” the works in this theoretical canon were exclusively the product of dead, white, European males. Until feminist and radical scholars began to challenge such canonical approaches—in literature, philosophy, and political theory—theorists largely continued to teach their subject through this lens. Although subject to critique, and occasionally revised or supplemented, the canon of texts remains an important starting point for understanding political thought. Even the most committed critics of the canon still refer to it and make use of it, if only to criticize it, as they nevertheless pursue other lines of thought.

Why should this be the case? One possible reason points to the stickiness of canons and traditions themselves, particularly when they are the subjects of inquiry. Each generation of theorists teaches the next in the way it was taught. There is also something comforting about having a canon, for it at least provides a ready description of what it is one does. Political theorists, in this context, read and talk about a particular set of old books. A second reason often given is that the canonical tradition survives because the texts themselves serve as an important source of instruction. George Kateb (2002), for example, sees canonical texts as a resource for those seeking to answer questions related to political theory (whether one regards them as “perennial” or not).

A final reason for exploring a canon involves conceiving the enterprise of political thinking in a more pragmatic context. James Tully (2002), for one, argues that the point of doing historical work in political theory is to show that hegemonic forms of thinking were situated responses to particular problems. Reading canonical works assists one in thinking about how our social and political practices develop or evolve, so that a historical survey of previous forms of political thought helps one identify alternatives to the current order. A further reason for thinking through a tradition that Tully offers is to identify the language games (i.e., vocabulary, examples, analogies, and narratives) through which political debates and struggles operate. Surveying our languages and practices, both historical and contemporary, can help us understand the interplay of problems and solutions related to governance and freedom.

There are dangers in embracing a canon, however. One such danger lies in institutionalizing, fixing, or reifying that canon.

With such a canon in place, we run the risk of misrecognizing our introductory exposure to a domain of theory or practice for the whole experience. We must avoid mistaking the map for the territory or taking the part for the whole. This is the sort of mistake that some anarchist thinkers refer to as representation—any situation in which one speaks on behalf of another, speaks about another, or speaks for another. For example, Todd May's (1994: 130) poststructuralist anarchism is built around the ethical principle that "practices of representing others to themselves—either in who they are or what they want—ought, as much as possible, to be avoided." Friendly suggestions are one thing, he suggests, but psychoanalytic interpretations are something else. Doubtless, political or governmental expressions of interest (statements about what the people of this community want) go even further; indeed, they constitute acts of authority or domination. No wonder, then, that Mikhail Bakunin rejected any authority that was externally imposed or presumed to be infallible. In any context—whether of Church or State, in therapy or the academy—his observation, "It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men," continues to ring true (Bakunin 1882).

May's observations remind us that we should not assume that the family resemblances that allow us to identify schools of thought, political or religious ideologies, and the like also permit us to treat these phenomena as monolithic. When those in the mainstream media invoke stereotypical frames of "anarchists," as Chris Hedges (2012) recently did, it should make one cringe. One might well reply with patient discussion of the realities of anarchist practice (Graeber 2012) or mount some form of retaliatory attack (Anonymous 2012). Regardless of what would be the most effective response, the controversy sparked by Hedges' column illustrates that the tendency to represent others to themselves is not unidirectional. When frames of "anarchists" are employed in this representational manner, some anarchists return the favor by invoking equally representational frames of "liberals" or "pacifists," "journalists" or "academics." Is the representation of comrades by our political antagonists to be decried as misleading and stereotypical, while our representation of those same antagonists to be embraced as truth spoken to power?

In drawing and maintaining boundary lines between the opponents and defenders of the various systems of domination, anarchists and other radicals seem to be involved in battles over representation—what A.K. Thompson (2010) has called "semiotic

street fights” and Graeber (2009) discussed under the heading of “mythological warfare.” In affirming anarchism’s principled opposition to representation, then, we seem to be asserting that anarchism (unlike other forms of radicalism) is neither doctrinaire nor prescriptive, but open-ended and personal in nature. The more general goal in opposing representational practices *per se*, particularly those commonly employed in the media and the academy, is to avoid dictating to others what they in fact believe, feel, say, or mean by virtue of certain statements, actions, or practices. This is an admirably non-authoritarian stance, but if taken too far, it could have the effect of making it hard to say anything at all about anything of importance. At the same time we acknowledge that anarchism is inchoate and mutable, we could very likely find ourselves in a situation in which we forgo the right to speak about others except in individualistic, idiosyncratic terms. Critique, whether in the form of word or deed, would be impossible.

In this context, say, I would not be able to discuss the practices of academics, because in claiming there is a class of people called “academics,” I have flattened, universalized, and otherwise unduly represented them. If I were to make claims about “platformists” or “insurrectionists”—or any other group—would I not similarly erase the diversity of views and experiences to be found among the people identifying with or active among the group? If one cannot discuss the generic for fear of committing representation, if one must instead remain in the grip of the unique and idiosyncratic, then it seems to me that conversation (let alone reflection or theory) becomes impossible. The only alternatives left would be either an autistic silence or a reliance on the ostensive—neither of which would help us advance the political aims to which we may be committed. Remaining mute before experience can amount to complicity with the evils we wish to prevent, and we cannot simply point to capitalism or domination and expect to be understood.

Again, we turn to a canon of works (in whatever form or medium) largely as an aid for understanding and changing the world before us. A canon lets us enter into a discursive context, reinterpreting it while in the course of engaging with it. The question of the canon’s origins remains, however. A typical suggestion is that the canon has been determined by some authoritative panel of experts, perhaps even a vanguard. One imagines a committee of learned folk, suitably credentialed, setting forth a list of Great Books to which we must attend if we want to count ourselves as educated or cultured beings. It is

rather farfetched to imagine such a panel of elder activists and theorists (or some combination thereof) coming together to debate which texts should be in a collection of the Great Books of the Anarchist World. Even though we speak of an anarchist canon, it is without question not a product of some authoritative body—no such body exists. Anarchists most likely would neither permit the establishment of one nor, if such a body were to appear, pay it any mind.

Perhaps canons emerge as parts of a spontaneous order, through the sort of repeated individual conversations mentioned above. Suppose one activist or theorist in a given milieu tells another that certain works of Noam Chomsky explain it all; the latter in turn tells another and another, and so forth. Repeated requests for Chomsky's works at book fairs and infoshops are made, along with other anarchist writers or artists who (for one reason or another) have become similarly prominent in the minds of people interested in anarchism. People outside the milieu hear about the recommendation through curious interaction, occasional eavesdropping, or governmental surveillance, say. Word spreads that one must read Chomsky, if one ever wants to understand how folks in the milieu view things. (The process continues, operating perhaps like a face-to-face equivalent of the algorithms used by Amazon.) Before we realize the gravity of our actions, "Chomsky" has thus become canonized. The people who follow will be forever induced, encouraged, pressured, or perhaps even forced to read Chomsky in order to join an affinity group or contribute to a journal, to participate effectively in the conversation, or to be welcomed within the anarchist milieu. The more voluntaristic this process of canonization is, obviously, the more acceptable it would be from an anarchist viewpoint. Even so, it seems likely that one person's or one group's freely given consent would become another's externally imposed requirement; an unfettered preference eventually mutates into an authoritative mandate.

Of course, it is entirely possible that canons do not appear in this spontaneous fashion. Regardless of how they emerge, the point is that once they are more or less formed, canons are certainly reaffirmed and reconstituted with every bit of research or commentary that is produced thereafter. As we saw above, even anarchist theorists and activists who want to write only about shared values nonetheless often make reference to canonical figures in the tradition. In this respect, the canons that emerge are not unlike the established social relationships or orthodox ideological perspectives that anarchists often oppose.

For canons to exist and persist, people—researchers and commentators, theorists and activists—need to turn to a relatively common set of works when seeking orientation or guidance. In accepting or presuming the existence of any particular canon, then, people help ensure that the canon’s contents have been shaped (to a degree) by their background perspectives and by the problems they seek to solve. As such, no canon can claim universality; each and every one is inherently selective, limited, and skewed.

To this point, I have been treating the notion of a canon as if it were restricted to books and authors. Though the term is commonly understood in this fashion, it certainly has broader applicability once one recognizes that canons function much like paradigms or research programs in science—that is, canonical works function as a set of exemplary achievements (Wolin 1968; Kuhn 1970; Lakatos and Musgrave 1970). We turn to such exemplars when we have lost our way, however temporarily, and need orientation for our thinking and acting.

We thus find anarchist canons developing not only around texts and theorists, but also around practices. Consider how we tell the history of anarchism by referring to archetypal events: the Paris Commune, Haymarket, the Spanish Civil War, May 1968, the Zapatista rebellion, Seattle, etc. We gain grounding and inspiration by revisiting the challenges comrades faced and the actions they took in those circumstances and others. Consider, too, how we discuss anarchist tactics by repeatedly invoking such common methods as trashing, spiking, and the efforts of the Black Bloc; not to mention, squats, street parties, and the TAZ, or even free schools, infoshops, and the DIY movement (Franks 2006). By reading or hearing about how others have employed these tactics, we gain a repertoire of practices to experiment with and a set of experiences to share and compare. Further, in the context of prefigurative social relationships, note the discussions of archetypal organizational efforts from Reclaim the Streets to Food Not Bombs, from Earth First! to Critical Mass, from the Situationist International to the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective (Shantz 2011).

How might such practices become canonical? One option is that self-identified anarchists develop a tactic or start a project, tell or write about it in anarchist forums, and thereby, get tagged with the label *anarchist*. Another option is that anarchists draw important values and lessons from the theoretical perspectives found in canonical texts and then implement them in practice. In the abstract, neither the inductive nor the deductive answer is

wholly correct. Just as with a textual canon, any concrete answer requires a more detailed genealogy in order to be acceptable. What is certain is that, once again, such a canonical tool kit results when people turn to a relatively common set of practices that provide some orientation or guidance about how to act in social and political contexts. As Ward (1996: 19) observed: even though many “obscure revolutionaries, propagandists and teachers who never wrote books” certainly advanced the anarchist cause; references to the “famous names of anarchism” recurred in his book “simply because what they wrote speaks, as the Quakers say, to our condition.”

Because we are in face-to-face and virtual conversation (both unmediated and mediated) with others, because we seek to build and to influence a range of social relationships, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that representation happens. Because we look around for guidance and orientation, because we seek to furnish and replenish our tool kits of concepts and practices, it seems that canons emerge as part of what seems to be a natural process. How then can we avoid the danger that a reified canon poses?

Uri Gordon (2008), in the introduction to his book, offered some useful reflections on the relations between theory and practice that may be helpful in this context. Because of their commitment to non-authoritarian values, anarchist theorists have to be very careful to avoid both representation and vanguardism in their thinking and writing. One common way of preventing these errors is for the writer to present an autobiographical sketch, thereby providing the reader with the coordinates necessary to locate the writer in sociopolitical space. This usually takes the form of a list of formative experiences and associations, of specific actions and movements of which the writer has been part. Whether or not activist bona fides have been put forth, writers often employ another device to soften the effect of their analyses—namely, presenting a list of caveats. Sometimes the caveats tell the reader what is not meant or intended by certain expressions or concerns; at other times, they put the project into the context of very limited or circumscribed aims. Here, among anarchists, it is frequently helpful to cite Graeber’s (2004: 12) insightful comment that theoretical interpretations should be properly understood “not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts.” In short, the basic lesson is for theorists to heed the milieu—or rather, milieux. As we know, anarchism collectively consists of a diverse set of schools and practices—none of which has any widely accepted, valid claim to representing or being *anarchism* per se. The risks posed by

reference to an anarchist canon can be ameliorated if the theorist generally stays close to the practical concerns of activists.

The primary means for addressing our representational quandary seems to be one of giving critical support to the idea of an anarchist canon. Whenever a canon develops, and it likely will, one should approach reading it not as a prescriptive condition for admission into the club. Being an anarchist is not a matter of having one's library card punched in all the right places. Instead, the canon should be seen as a means of enabling scholars and activists to gain an understanding of the tradition (finding our roots) and acquire some leverage for creatively contributing to it. Canonical works do not so much *represent* (stand for) anarchism as much as they provide the means through which we can *re-present* (offer anew) some of the ideas, values, and spirit found within anarchism. In short, one should take a pragmatic approach that initially accepts the canon as an ever-available, but only apparently fixed, point of entry through which the canon itself can be transformed—as Derrida (1988: 62) observed, “iterability alters.”

The second path of escape might be to continue to subject any canon that emerges to questioning and challenge. In this sense, we can use the canon not only as a point of entry, but also as a line of flight. Within the broad context of anarchism, advocates of particular (sub)traditions routinely argue with each other about the relative merit of this or that text, this or that way of thinking, this or that strategy or tactic. The existence of contending schools of thought, and the diversity of reasoning they embody, thus presents one possible way of avoiding the danger of reification. Further, particular challenges to any potentially institutionalized canon need to be encouraged on behalf of works, thinkers, and schools that are left out or left behind by the partisans of the canon. Feminists and critical race theorists have served that function for other canonical domains, as well as for anarchism, and they should continue to do so. Moreover, the gaps in the canon are a valuable source for creative renewal and revitalization of the broader tradition. Consider, for example, the insight and energy brought to anarchism from the rediscovery of Stirner's thought or Situationist practices. In general, we challenge or change a tradition largely by remembering what we have forgotten about it, by bringing to the forefront what we have otherwise left behind.

A final path for confronting the canon is for scholars and theorists, text-based as they are, to keep in mind that anarchism has long been conceived as an action-oriented tradition. Even as a

mode of thought or ideology, its concerns have largely been practical ones. Theorists should pay attention to activists' expressed concerns and to informed reflections on their practices. In addition, theorists need to pay attention to the debates that often emerge among activists in the different milieux. In this sense, commentators and observers should plan to take polemics seriously, heeding and engaging with the controversies occurring among activists in different locales. Face-to-face interaction with activists helps, to be sure, but so does paying attention to the cultural products that regularly emerge in the course of various practices.

Taking such an approach to thinking about the canon also requires some self-reflexive thought about the extent to which it either violates or remains true to the anarchist spirit, however understood. Certainly, intellectual work—thinking and writing—has not been absent from various anarchist traditions past and present. Many anarchists of the nineteenth and twentieth century were writers as well as activists; many anarchists today are little different. We know of their struggles and concerns through their writings, art, conversations, deeds, and memories which have engaged and inspired us. Yet, some anarchist theorists and commentators want to insist that treating anarchism as an ideology or a political theory is a mistake from the outset. Amid assertions that all of the “isms” are “wasms,” the goal seems to be to remind us that promoting anarchy is an activity, not a body of doctrine. Some activists further take on an anti-intellectual posture, criticizing those engaged in scholarship either as insufficiently anarchist or as excessively careerist, and encouraging anarchists to engage in action and nothing but action. The focus of our efforts should be on *doing*, conceived as the practical negation of an existing state of affairs (Holloway 2005: 23). In this context, “what anarchism needs is what might be called Low Theory: a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project” (Graeber 2004: 9).

Even as we pursue the paths highlighted above, anarchists should be careful not to exchange one form of reified thinking for another. One should not fetishize a “lower” theory that emerges from activist participation any more than one should fetishize a “higher” form of theorizing that might be evident in a canon. Properly understood, the longstanding truism about the necessary interrelationship between revolutionary theory and practice still retains some validity. How, in the final analysis, is it possible to explore a heterodox perspective via more or less canonical

writers, texts, or practices? Is it even possible to hold canonical writers, texts, or practices in a critical or tentative embrace?

In some respects, the answers to these questions remain empirical or practical matters. We cannot provide them in any absolute or eternal fashion. In the experimental approach taken by some Quakers, we have to draw upon the continuing revelations that come to us in the course of our daily social and political lives. Whenever we encounter a particular element of an established canon, or confront the entirety of canonical works or practices, we must always test its worth by assessing whether or not it speaks to our condition. In other words, the arguments made for any principle or practice must stand on their own merits, independent of whether or not they were drawn from or shared by a figure from the canon (Philp 2008: 146). We must challenge the works and practices we encounter to take proper account of the lessons that we have drawn from our own experience and judgment.

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