

The Possibilities of Anarchist History Rethinking the Canon and Writing History

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ABSTRACT

While the study of anarchism has undergone a renaissance in recent years, historical scholarship has been a relatively minor aspect of this renewed focus. Presenting an historiographical examination of the main forms of writing on anarchist ideas, this article argues that the predominance of ‘canonistic’ approaches to anarchism is in part a consequence of the disciplinary dominance of political theory in the study of anarchism. Despite anarchism’s complex intellectual history, intellectual historians continue to overlook this rich political tradition. The article concludes by reflecting on the possibilities offered by an intellectual history of anarchism informed by recent methodological developments in cultural history. Not only does this allow us to see beyond the canon, but it also offers new insights on anarchism’s most influential thinkers.

KEYWORDS

anarchism, classical anarchism, post-anarchism, canonization, political theory, social history of ideas, intellectual history, cultural history, Peter Kropotkin

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INTRODUCTION: ANARCHISM AND THE HISTORY OF HISTORY

In the year that Proudhon published his most famous work, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?*, Thomas Carlyle was busy delivering a series of lectures that set out the necessary path for the study of history. Published the following year as *Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), the book set out Carlyle's position that certain 'heroic' individuals were able to recognise the underlying reality of human affairs and act with confidence and audacity—interventions that structured the historical process. 'All things that we see standing accomplished in the world,' he suggested, are the 'material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world.'¹ History, understood as the narrativization of this process, should therefore concern itself with the thoughts and deeds of these gifted individuals.

Carlyle's strictures for the proper study of history will no doubt seem unsatisfactory to readers of *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*. The glaring gender bias aside, the idea that history is best understood through the actions of Bismarcks and Bonapartes is likely to be dismissed as wholly inappropriate for fathoming the complexities of the past. Yet Carlyle's musings on method exercised a significant role in the early development of history as a discipline, and, in a way, his understanding of history as defined by the actions of 'great men' has endured in certain forms of anarchist scholarship. That is, at least, how critics of the canonisation of anarchism would probably conceive the issue, seeing the reduction of anarchism to the writings of a select band of thinkers as subliminally buying into Carlyle's understanding of the proper method for studying history. 'Great man' history would become entrenched with the professionalization of history, not necessarily a consequence of familiarity with Carlyle's work itself, but parallel developments in Germany echoed many of his assumptions. Leopold Von Ranke was motivated, like Carlyle, by the desire to uncover a providential hand in the unfolding of human history and railed against the destabilising impact of the dual revolution, which helps explain their focus on the heroic. For Ranke, however, this was less the actions of individuals than those of the 'Great Powers' whose actions textured the historical

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History: In One Volume* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1898), 1. For a useful discussion of Carlyle's understanding of history, consider John Morrow, *Thomas Carlyle* (London: Continuum, 2006), 161–191.

fabric.² Seen in broad terms the distinction meant little, although it does help us see Ranke, fittingly, in the context of a pre-unification Germany fixated by questions of tradition and power. Although Ranke's influence was largely methodological, his call for historians to infiltrate the archive reflected the focus on political history as the principal type of scholarship, and it was this defence of empiricism as much as his own work in diplomatic history that informed the subsequent development of history—especially in Britain.³

The professionalization of history therefore runs parallel to the development of modern nationalism, but less indulging readers might object that this narrative of personified great powers has little to do with anarchism, a political movement whose *raison d'être* is a deep suspicion of such interpretations of politics and history. For Peter Kropotkin though, someone who took a deep interest in history, the changing fashions of historical scholarship were relevant to his broader political project. Writing at the turn of the twentieth-century, when diplomatic history was at its height, Kropotkin polemically suggested that the type of history represented by Ranke was becoming increasingly passé. Pursuing his ontological theory that modern scientific developments had served to decentre the universe, Kropotkin ventured that 'the sciences that treat man' displayed a similar fragmentation:

Thus we see that history, after having been the history of kingdoms, tends to become the history of nations and then the study of individuals. The historian wants to know how the members, of which such a nation was composed, lived at such a time, what their beliefs were, their means of existence, what ideal society was visible to them, and what means they possessed to march towards this idea And

² John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 431.

³ Ranke's empiricism is captured in his oft-quoted dictum that history 'merely wants to show how, essentially, things happened': quoted in John Warren, 'The Rankean Tradition in British historiography, 1850 to 1950,' in Stefan Berger et al. (eds.), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 25 [22–39]. This is often also translated as, 'Its aim is merely to show how things actually were': see John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1989), 11.

by the action of all those forces, formerly neglected, he interprets the great historical phenomena.⁴

Crucially, these were not the individuals of Carlyle's dyspeptic historical narratives, but the actions of those hitherto hidden from the historian's gaze. It was a method that Kropotkin would later strive to apply himself in his monumental *The Great French Revolution* (1910), a book that reiterated his view that the 'beating heart' of the Revolution lay in the streets of Paris, not in the National Assembly.⁵ Although conspicuously short on evidence, Kropotkin's argument that the historical epistemology had shifted downwards in the rank of orders was not an exaggeration. True, 'high politics, constitutional, diplomatic and military history' continued to dominate the intellectual landscape, but it is possible to trace the emergence of precursors to the economic, social, and cultural histories that would rise to prominence in the mid-twentieth century, and undermine the hegemony of historical scholarship that took political elites as their starting point.⁶

'Classic' cultural history emerged with Johan Huizinga and Jacob Burckhardt, which looked to the canon of high art, great literature, and philosophical speculation to uncover deeper truths about the middle ages.⁷ Tellingly, there were tentative steps in the direction of labour history, notably in the work of the Webbs and the Hammonds, a development that acted in concert with the emergence of the working-class as a political agent.⁸ The growing

⁴ Peter Kropotkin, 'Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,' in George Woodcock (ed.), *Fugitive Writings* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1993), 99–121.

⁵ Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 27.

⁶ Burrow, *A History of Histories*, 438.

⁷ Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 7.

⁸ Sidney Webb (1859–1947) and Beatrice Webb (1858–1943) were the husband and wife team who helped found the Fabian Society and played an important role in the foundation of the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895. Both published widely on economic and social issues, and historical study featured prominently in their approach, with economic history featuring from the outset on the curriculum of the LSE. Their co-authored book *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894) was an influential, and frequently reprinted, work. John Lawrence Hammond (1872–1949) and Barbara Hammond (1873–1961) were another husband and wife team who co-wrote pioneering historical works, especially in the fields of labour and social history. Their most significant books were the trilogy *The Village Labour: 1760–1832: A Study*

influence of Marxism would later concretize this disciplinary boundary and would also greatly influence the emergence of social history as the century progressed, although this sub-discipline also had German roots, in Karl Lamprecht's rejection of the 'Rankean orthodoxy' and its concentration on 'great men.'⁹ Understanding the past through the machinations of political elites was falling from favour.

This overview of the development of history as a discipline is, inevitably, cursory. In the twentieth century, with disciplinary specialization, it becomes less fitting to talk of a dominant historical epistemology as historians began to splinter into various factions and make claims for the primacy of their own approach to the past. This process began at the end of the nineteenth century, indeed, the words 'specialism' and 'specialization' date from the 1860s and 1870s, a fact that makes Kropotkin's pursuit of a synthetic philosophy appear somewhat out of time.¹⁰ While historical practice has diversified, the study of anarchist history has remained largely impervious to these disciplinary changes. Given that these territorial debates have usually taken place in an overtly academic context this is not necessarily surprising, although it is peculiar that while the renewed interest in anarchism has tended to cut across disciplines—as the existence of *ADCS* testifies and the articles in *Anarchist Studies* repeatedly affirm—there have not been parallel developments in historical writing on anarchism. David Goodway lamented this fact in 1989, noting that:

Anarchist historiography is a frustrating field, traditionally tending to be hagiographic or . . . antiquarian in approach. When it comes to their own past—or, indeed, the past in general—anarchists have not subjected it to radical analysis or acted as the innovators they have been in other disciplines.

There was, however, cause for optimism, and Goodway opined that the major innovation in 'historiography *tout court*' was the

in the Government of England before the Reform Bill (1911), *The Town Labourer: 1760-1832: the New Civilization* (1917), and *The Skilled Labourer, 1760-1832* (1919).

⁹ Peter Burke, *History & Social Theory* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 14.

¹⁰ Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 454.

growing intellectual self-confidence of social history, promising exciting research into anarchism as a popular movement.¹¹ His paean for social history was itself a product of the time, but Goodway's criticism of the lack of historical attention paid to anarchism is an enduring issue. In what follows I want to consider the relation between the underdeveloped nature of anarchist historiography, something that is thankfully beginning to change, and the prominence of the canon in commentaries on anarchist ideas. The idea of the anarchist canon, it is argued, has its roots in the disciplinary dominance of political theory in anarchist studies' recent past.¹² That analyses of anarchism published between the early 1970s and mid-1990s were primarily concerned with positioning anarchism in relation to more established political ideologies and strived to uncover anarchism's contribution to the grander questions of human existence, the effect has been to perpetuate the canonical approach, rather than appreciate the vicissitudes of its history.

A casualty in this has been historical scholarship sensitive to the contextual formulation of anarchist arguments, an approach that would focus less on anarchists' relation to the supposedly timeless problematics of philosophy and more on the immediately significant issues confronting anarchist thinkers. To appreciate the complexities of this contextualism is to uncover a fresh way of approaching anarchism's past, one that holds before it the chance to nuance our understanding of the canon, or, if necessary, reject it completely. With this objective in mind, this paper closes with a brief statement in the spirit of Goodway's twenty-three years ago, of some of the potential avenues for anarchist history, and a reflection on promising recent developments—especially apparent in the context of transnational history.

CONSUMING ANARCHIST IDEAS AND FORGING THE CANON: POLITICAL THEORY, HISTORY AND ANTHOLOGY

¹¹ David Goodway, 'Introduction,' in David Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1989), 7 [1-22].

¹² Nicolas Walter offered a useful, if now somewhat dated, bibliographic overview to writing on anarchism in 1971. The essay lamented the paucity of historical writing on anarchism, but was confident that this would change imminently. See Nicolas Walter, 'Anarchism in Print: Yesterday and Today,' in David E. Apter and James Joll (eds.), *Anarchism Today* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 127-144.

Given the links between German philosophy and the ‘great man’ approach to the past—Carlyle was himself heavily influenced by the idealist tradition—it is fitting that one of the first to conceive anarchist history in canonical terms should be German. Even more significant is the fact that Paul Eltzbacher’s book, first published in 1900 as *Der Anarchismus* and then translated into English by the American individualist-anarchist Steven Byington in 1908 as *Anarchism*, should be republished in 2004 with the catechismal title *The Great Anarchists: Ideas and Teachings of Seven Major Thinkers*.¹³ Eltzbacher’s rather dry analysis of anarchism centred upon what has since become a familiar collection of names. William Godwin is placed, at least in chronological terms, at the apex of the tradition, followed by Proudhon, Stirner, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. Included at the end are Benjamin Tucker—perhaps contributing to Tucker’s willingness to print the book in his publishing house—and Leo Tolstoy, a figure who has a more ambiguous relationship to anarchism than the rest, with the possible exception of Stirner. These names largely comprise what has come to be seen as the anarchist canon, although there have been skirmishes in the border areas as various historians make particular claims for individual thinkers, or dispute the inclusion of others. George Woodcock’s highly influential survey *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (1962), itself approaching canonical status, followed Eltzbacher in identifying Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Tolstoy as innovators of anarchism while demoting Tucker. The popularity of Woodcock’s book, when juxtaposed against the development of anarchist studies over the last twenty-years, goes some way to explain the predominance of a rather hermetic pantheon of key thinkers.

The modest revival of interest in anarchist ideas between the 1970s and early 1990s was primarily a result, in academic circles at least, of the renewed gaze of the political theorist. A result of this was that texturing the contours of the anarchist tradition and

¹³ Paul Eltzbacher, *Der Anarchismus* (Berlin: Topos Verlag, 1900); Paul Eltzbacher, *Anarchism* (London: A.C. Fifield, 1909); Paul Eltzbacher, *The Great Anarchists: Ideas and Teachings of Seven Major Thinkers* (New York: Dover, 2004). I am indebted to two works in particular for their discussion of approaches to anarchist history: see Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford, 2005), 3–43 (especially 10–15), and Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009), 34–40.

clarifying the contextual forces that shaped anarchist ideas in the first place became less important than uncovering the contribution of anarchists to political thought in general. Perhaps spurred by works like Robert Paul Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism* (1970), a book that was silent on the history of anarchist thought, there was a movement towards tying down the tradition with the hope of judging its general contribution to human knowledge. R.B. Fowler's article 'The Anarchist Tradition of Political Thought' (1972), which remains influential, paved the way, buying into Eltzbacher's canon, albeit peculiarly jettisoning Tucker in favour of Alexander Herzen.¹⁴ April Carter's *The Political Theory of Anarchism* published the year before Fowler's article held a more catholic view of the anarchist canon, even if it did continue to set the analysis in the frame of canonical liberal theory, incorporating overlooked figures like Alexander Berkman, as well as being sensitive to the contemporary anarchisms of Alex Comfort and Paul Goodman, amongst others.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the common approach, encapsulated in David Miller's *Anarchism* (1984) and George Crowder's *Classical Anarchism* (1991), was to use a select number of anarchist theorists to reach an adequate definition and critically assess its prospects. Both begin by posing this question of 'definition,' and each ends with a reflection on the 'anarchist case,' which is met with scepticism.¹⁶ This attempt to reach an abstract delineation of anarchism has proven influential, both with those following in Miller and Crowder's train, and with those seeking to challenge their assessment of anarchist theory.¹⁷ By orienting themselves in this

¹⁴ R.B. Fowler, 'The Anarchist Tradition of Political Thought,' *The Western Political Quarterly* 25.4 (Dec. 1972): 738 [738–752]. For Fowler's current use, consider Kinna, *Anarchism*, 11, and Schmidt and van der Walt, *Black Flame*, 81 n228. D. Novak's article on anarchism is a precursor, which, although following Eltzbacher's canon, looks further back to early religious movements as possible 'intellectual predecessors.' This article is, however, largely forgotten: see D. Novak, 'The Place of Anarchism in the History of Political Thought,' *The Review of Politics* 20.3 (July 1958): 319 [307–329].

¹⁵ April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1971). The bibliography is indicative (see 113–116), but so is the 'suggested reading' section, which continues to rely on the classics: Proudhon, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Tolstoy (see 111).

¹⁶ David Miller, *Anarchism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1984), 2; George Crowder, *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 170.

¹⁷ This influence can be seen in Michael Freeden's positive referencing of

literature, even to criticise it, the effect has been to perpetuate a canonical way of viewing anarchism. It is also apparent that both works, especially *Anarchism*, rely heavily on Woodcock's canonical history, and whilst Miller's work has dissenting chapters on the New Left, syndicalism, and individualist anarchism, the focus remains squarely fixed on Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin.

Other works of political theory tend to follow suit. Alan Ritter's *Anarchism: a Theoretical Analysis* (1980) homes in on Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin to support its supposition that 'communal individuality' lies at the heart of anarchism.¹⁸ And more recently, David Morland's *Demanding the Impossible: Human Nature and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Social Anarchism* (1998) focuses squarely on Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin as exemplars of mature anarchist theory, alongside offering a deeper prehistory of anarchism in the *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century. The effect, and this is a feature of Crowder's work also, is to deepen the philosophical context of the canon, but leave its boundaries intact. Although this apparent historical contextualisation might seem to shift these works away from political theory *per se*, there are subtle differences between the primarily textual approach adopted and the contextual focus of the historian. Most obviously, their emphasis on texts as self-sufficient source material presupposes a certain timelessness in Western philosophy, making deeper contextualisation redundant. The emphasis is on the resonances between the philosophy of the Enlightenment (itself a dubious catchall term) and the anarchist tradition, and it is suggested that 'Rousseauian positions' are 'paralleled by Godwin and Proudhon,' or that Rousseau's ideas 'formed a platform for [sic] which the anarchists develop[ed] their attack on the state.'¹⁹ The difficulty with this approach, and why these works are representative of political theory rather than the history of ideas, is that they tend to dehistoricise anarchism by approaching its history as one of eternal questions and answers.²⁰ It is supposed that Rousseau's theorisation of freedom

both texts in his important study of political ideologies. See Michael Freedon, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 311, 312.

¹⁸ Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3.

¹⁹ Crowder, *Classical Anarchism*, 29. It is worth noting, however, that Crowder is generally sceptical of the influence of Rousseau on anarchism.

²⁰ For a classic dissection of this approach, see Quentin Skinner,

can be mapped onto Kropotkin's with comparative ease, meaning that concepts like 'freedom' become static, something that makes sense across temporal and spatial contexts and can be translated between cultures with ease.²¹ Obviously, while important connections exist between Rousseau and the formation of the anarchist tradition, the historian would no doubt sound caution in over-emphasising these points of contact.²² Since Kropotkin's engagement with Rousseau is in fact surprisingly limited, the value of approaching this relationship in a more critical manner seems self-evident.

The relationship between the 'classical' tradition and the Enlightenment has informed the most significant intellectual development in anarchist studies in recent years and one that *ADCS* explored in its first issue: the emergence of post-anarchism.²³ Developing the idea that Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin were unabashed children of the Enlightenment, a number of commentators have viewed this heritage through the multifocal lens of poststructuralist philosophy. Spying a troubling connection between the classical tradition and Enlightenment humanism—seen by Saul Newman in four principal themes: essentialism, a 'universality of morality and reason,' faith in 'natural laws,' a 'dialectical view of history,' and a 'certain positivism'—the post-anarchist critique challenges the emancipatory potential of anarchism on the basis of its adherence to these rationalist shibboleths.²⁴ The crux of this critique is a familiar one, captured in Crowder's diagnosis of

'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,' *History and Theory* 8.1 (1969): 3–53.

²¹ Crowder, *Classical Anarchism*, 7–16. Anarchists are also frequently guilty of this ahistoricism and often tend to amplify it, encapsulated in Kropotkin's reflection that 'Anarchist philosophy' was advanced by Zeno and can also be seen in the Hussites and Anabaptists. See P.A.K., 'Anarchism,' in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: Eleventh Edition: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 915 [914–919].

²² For a useful discussion of this, see C. Alexander McKinley, *Illegitimate Children of the Enlightenment: Anarchists and the French Revolution, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

²³ For an invaluable introduction, see, in particular: Süreyya Evren, 'Introduction: How New Anarchism Changed the World (of Opposition) after Seattle and Gave Birth to Post-Anarchism,' in Duane Rousselle and Süreyya Evren (eds.), *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 1–19.

²⁴ Saul Newman, *The Politics of Postanarchism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 6.

Kropotkin's troubling scientism, allegedly resulting in a Hegelian view of history that imparted contradictory conclusions for social emancipation.²⁵ Accepting that anarchism is 'imbued with a type of essentialism or naturalism that forms the foundation of its thought,' post-anarchists tend, nevertheless, to depart from the Crowder/Miller explanation in believing that something is salvageable from this wreck.²⁶ For Newman, the reflexivity of post-anarchism shows that 'anarchism has something to teach itself'; for others, post-structuralism offers the opportunity to 'reformulate the claims of anarchism.'²⁷

Despite this iconoclastic urge, post-anarchists have largely left the anarchist canon untroubled. Post-anarchist texts have been less concerned with complicating the history of anarchist ideas than extracting a kernel of anarchist theory, an echo of the political theory works outlined above. For some critics of the post-anarchist position, this lack of necessary care in fathoming the depth and variety of anarchism's intellectual history means that the post-anarchist critique itself rests on unstable foundations.²⁸ As Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur complained, many post-anarchist texts adopt a 'reductive' interpretation of anarchism centred on a 'limited number of "great thinkers"' and are insensitive to the 'margins' of the tradition—a lacuna given that many of these 'second wave' anarchists were themselves intent on addressing the weaknesses of the past.²⁹ What is particularly significant in this is that even in one of the most significant innovations in anarchist theory, there remains a discernible thread between the generations in their identification

²⁵ Crowder, *Classical Anarchism*, 156–169. Similar assessments appear in: Miller, *Anarchism*, 75, and Richard Sonn, *Anarchism* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 37. For an alternative view, consider Matthew S. Adams, 'Kropotkin: Evolution, Revolutionary Change and the End of History,' *Anarchist Studies* 19.1 (2011): 56–81.

²⁶ Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 63.

²⁷ Newman, *Politics of Postanarchism*, 182; Andrew M. Koch, 'Post-Structuralism and the Epistemological Basis of Anarchism,' in Rousselle and Evren, *Post-Anarchism*, 39 [23–40].

²⁸ Consider Allan Antliff, 'Anarchy, Power and Post-Structuralism,' in Rousselle and Evren, *Post-Anarchism*, 160–167, and Benjamin Franks, 'Post-Anarchism: A Partial Account,' in Rousselle and Evren, *Post-Anarchism*, 168–180.

²⁹ Jesse Cohn and Shawn Wilbur, 'What's Wrong with Postanarchism?', *The Anarchist Library*: <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jesse-cohn-and-shawn-wilbur-what-s-wrong-with-postanarchism>.

of a canon of great texts. Indeed, if anything, in terms of political theory, between Eltzbacher and Todd May the canon has shrunk: Tucker and Tolstoy are elided, and the heart of anarchism is seen in the work of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. And even for these three thinkers the coverage varies, for while Kropotkin's primary works are all available in English, for both Proudhon and Bakunin there is thinner coverage, resulting in the peculiar situation where commentators identify Proudhon as one of anarchism's canonical thinkers but are often only familiar with his *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* and occasionally *Idée Générale De La Revolution au XIXe Siecle*.³⁰ Lip service is paid to the idea that anarchism is a mutable political tradition along the lines that 'anarchism is a diverse series of philosophies and political strategies', but the inquisition is primarily levelled at a recognisably select group of thinkers.³¹ That said, given that post-anarchists are primarily concerned with theorising a step beyond the historical tradition, the lack of attention paid to adding nuances to this history is unsurprising.

While it has been claimed thus far that the endurance of the canon has primarily been a result of the primacy of political theory in the field of anarchist studies, it should be noted that there are important exceptions to this trend. Anarchist writers like Nicolas Walter, for instance, never lost sight of the importance of recognising the efforts of those often overlooked in scholarly writing on anarchism, particularly those whose efforts tended to bridge the divide between scholarship and activism, encapsulated in his occasional essays on Joseph Lane and Lillian Wolfe.³² Looking back further, a rich historical imagination is noticeable in other anarchists. Kropotkin, for instance, usually started his books and articles by locating anarchism in the

³⁰ A useful and brief historical overview that comments on the French and English sources is Alex Prichard, 'The Ethical Foundations of Proudhon's Anarchism,' in Benjamin Franks and Matthew Wilson (eds.), *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 86–112.

³¹ Saul Newman, 'Anarchism and the Politics of Ressentiment,' in John Moore (ed.), *I am Not a Man, I am Dynamite: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition* (Autonomedia: Brooklyn, 2004), 109 [107–126].

³² See Nicolas Walter, 'Joseph Lane' and 'Lillian Wolfe,' in David Goodway (ed.), *The Anarchist Past and Other Essays* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2007), 209–219 and 231–237. Walter's historical interests are also apparent in David Goodway's other collection of his writings: see Nicolas Walter, *Damned Fools in Utopia and Other Writings on Anarchism and War Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011).

broader currents of socialist thought and in *Modern Science and Anarchism* offered a detailed overview of Western intellectual history.³³ In *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, Rudolf Rocker followed Kropotkin's lead in tracing a comparatively detailed pre-history of anarchism, producing an evolutionary account of its development.³⁴ The most significant historical voice during this period was, however, Max Nettlau. Often described as the 'Herodotus of anarchism,' Nettlau was an avid collector of the fragmentary sources of anarchism's past and used these materials to produce a range of histories, biographies, and bibliographies, the latter deemed by Kropotkin a 'most important' and 'reasoned' work.³⁵ Nettlau's major work, a monumental seven-volume history of anarchism, reflected his thoroughness and placed the major anarchist theoreticians in an obsessively detailed historical context. That Nettlau's name remains relatively unfamiliar, however, sadly denotes the impact of his work. As Heiner Becker noted in the introduction to the heavily edited edition of Nettlau's history published by *Freedom Press*, one of the few pieces of his writing translated into English, 'he is virtually unknown,' despite being 'the pioneer in the field of the historiography of anarchism.'³⁶

Moreover, emerging concurrently with the attentions of the political theorist, there was also a modest revival in anarchist history—a revival that bore a vague imprint of the burgeoning interest in social history praised by Goodway. Dealing with the British movement, John Quail's *The Slow Burning Fuse* (1978) and Hermia Oliver's *International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (1983) were both shaped by the *raison d'être* of social history, the 'premise . . . that ordinary people not only have a history but contribute to shaping history more generally.'³⁷

³³ See Peter Kropotkin, 'Modern Science and Anarchism,' in George Woodcock (ed.), *Evolution and Environment* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1995), 15–107.

³⁴ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism* (London: Freedom Press, 1973).

³⁵ Nicolas Walter, 'A flawless reminder of life left of left,' *Times Higher Education Supplement*, October 10, 1997: 27; Kropotkin, 'Anarchism,' 919.

³⁶ Heiner M. Becker, 'Introduction,' in Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1996), ix [ix–xxiii].

³⁷ Peter N. Stearns, 'Social History Present and Future,' *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (Autumn, 2003): 9 [9–19]; John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (London: Paladin, 1978); Hermia Oliver, *International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983).

Quail makes this point at the outset, noting that his book is not concerned with ‘the literati’; rather:

It is as a movement in relation to the ebb and flow of popular revolt that this book concerns itself with the British anarchists. Only in relation to this does it consider Anarchist philosophy and its philosophers.³⁸

Oliver’s book, although somewhat dismissive of Quail’s ‘spirited’ work, generally follows suit in seeking to unearth ‘new matter’ rather than dwell on the prominent figures, which explains, the author notes, ‘why less is said about Kropotkin’ in his book.³⁹ Nineteen years previously, James Joll had offered a detailed if rather freewheeling history, *The Anarchists* (1964), that sought to blend an assessment of anarchism’s canonical figures (Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin) with an appreciation of wider themes in anarchist history—propaganda by the deed, the complexities of syndicalism, and the Spanish Revolution.⁴⁰ In a sense, this brief flurry of historical activity was a response to the canonical approach of political theory. This is certainly true of Quail and Oliver’s books with the former noting that ‘recent years has seen . . . assorted attempts to assess Anarchist ideas of a rather patchy quality.’⁴¹ While Joll sought to bridge the gap by offering a historically grounded interpretation of anarchist ideas, both Quail and Oliver’s texts were more radical in calling for a focus on the day-to-day activities of anarchist activists. The influence of social history is seen in the emphasis on the ephemera of the movement—the papers, forgotten pamphlets, and smoky meetings—that gave anarchism its practical impetus with relatively little interest shown in the content of these ideas themselves. Despite this brief flurry of historical activity, the comparative obscurity of these texts is a testament to the continued primacy of political theory in anarchist studies. While Quail’s book continues to exercise some influence, both Oliver’s and Joll’s have drifted into the shadows, notwithstanding the latter’s role as a prominent popular historian of socialism.

Historical writing on anarchism never completely disappeared and, amongst anarchists themselves, the history of their movement remained of interest, but in the context of the renewal of

³⁸ Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, xiv, xiii.

³⁹ Oliver, *International Anarchist Movement*, n.p.

⁴⁰ James Joll, *The Anarchists* (London: Methuen).

⁴¹ Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, xiii.

interest in anarchism in the second half of the twentieth century, it remained of minor importance. The spate of biographies on anarchist figures⁴² and predominantly biographical exegesis of anarchist ideas⁴³ in these years should be mentioned, although invariably these shored up the canonisation underway in political theory.⁴⁴ In addition, some of these works were of debatable quality, especially the dated rash of 'psychohistories' prominent in Bakunin scholarship.⁴⁵ Even more significant, as Woodcock

⁴² Consider E.H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (London: MacMillan, 1937)—this text was reprinted in 1975; Edward Hyams, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary life, Mind and Works* (London: J. Murray, 1979); Anthony Masters, *Bakunin: The Father of Anarchism* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1974); Martin A. Miller, *Kropotkin* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976); George Woodcock and Ivan Akakumović, *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin* (London: T.V. Boardman, 1950); George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

⁴³ In this category I would place works like K. Steven Vincent's excellent study of Proudhon, which is more focused on Proudhon's intellectual development than providing a comprehensive biography. See K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). In a similar vein, although less successful, consider Richard B. Saltman, *The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin* (Westport: Greenwood, 1983); Stephen Osofsky, *Peter Kropotkin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979).

⁴⁴ An exception to this is the recovery of Gustav Landauer's anarchism. Yet, despite the glut of biographical works on him during these years, he rarely found himself manoeuvred into the dominant canon itself, and it is only recently that major attention has been devoted to him. The main biographies date from the 1970s: see Ruth Link-Salinger Hyman, *Gustav Landauer: Philosopher of Utopia* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977); Eugene Lunn, *Prophet of Community: the Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer* (London: University of California Press, 1973); Charles B. Maurer, *Call to Revolution: the Mystical Anarchism of Gustav Landauer* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1971). Landauer's own work was only made available with Gustav Landauer, *For Socialism*, trans. David J. Parent (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1978). This lacuna was recently partly filled by Gabriel Kuhn's excellent collection: Gustav Landauer, *Revolution and Other Writings: A Political Reader*, trans. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland: AK Press 2010). I consider Landauer's influence in the British context in a forthcoming article: see Matthew S. Adams, 'Art, Education, and Revolution: Herbert Read and the Reorientation of British Anarchism,' *History of European Ideas* (Nov. 2012); doi: 10.1080/13825585.2012.736220.

⁴⁵ In particular, see: Arthur Mendel, *Michael Bakunin: Roots of Apocalypse* (New York: Praeger, 1981). Also connected to this approach, consider Aileen Kelly, *Mikhail Bakunin: A Study in the Psychology and Politics of*

noted in the revised edition of his classic history of anarchism—revised, it should be said, to reach a more optimistic evaluation of anarchism’s future—was the emergence of the anarchist anthology. Attempting to mirror the ‘strikingly protean fluidity’ that Woodcock identified as a source of anarchism’s strength, his own contribution to the genre *The Anarchist Reader* (1977) operated on a basis of inclusivity, giving space to thinkers marginalised in his history like Alexander Berkman and showing sensitivity to contemporary developments by including Herbert Read, Alex Comfort, and Murray Bookchin.⁴⁶ The serious lacuna in this, as has been noted, is the absence of women.⁴⁷ Although Woodcock included one selection from Emma Goldman, given anarchism’s history of challenging gender inequalities and the historically influential role of women in the movement, this is a peculiar blind spot. It is one compounded by the facts that the Goldman text included is, despite her copious writings on sexual politics, an excoriation of the ‘Bolsheviki,’ and that as the book was published in the late-1970s, Woodcock seemed impervious to the backdrop of radical feminism that was then a prominent feature of the political terrain.⁴⁸

The anthologisation of anarchist texts has gone some way to destabilising the canon, but as with Woodcock’s selection, these books have their own problems. Daniel Guérin, who was subsequently to publish his own influential reader, voiced scepticism at the value of these efforts:

It is doubtful whether this literary effort is . . . very effective. It is difficult to trace the outlines of anarchism. Its master thinkers rarely condensed their ideas into systematic works. If, on occasion, they tried to do so, it was only in thin pamphlets designed for propaganda and popularization in which only fragments of their ideas can be observed. Moreover, there are several kinds of anarchism and many variations within the thought of each of the great libertarians.⁴⁹

Utopianism (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

⁴⁶ George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (London: Penguin, 1986), 414; George Woodcock (ed.), *The Anarchist Reader* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977).

⁴⁷ Kinna, *Anarchism*, 13.

⁴⁸ Emma Goldman, ‘The Failure of the Russian Revolution,’ in *The Anarchist Reader*, 157 [153–162].

⁴⁹ Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York:

Despite his doubts, his two-volume selection *No Gods No Masters* (1998)⁵⁰ innovatively attempted to historicise the anarchist tradition while highlighting the significance of fragmentary texts in appreciating the diversity of anarchist history. As the quotation above suggests, Guérin trod familiar ground in offering Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin as the ‘master thinkers’ of the tradition, but included lesser known texts from their respective *oeuvres*; for instance, Kropotkin’s speech from a Lyon court before his imprisonment in 1883 and letters from Bakunin regarding his *contretemps* with Marx. The historical value of Guérin’s collection is particularly evident in the second volume, which incorporates missives from the Kronstadt naval base and the Spanish Revolution, alongside the work of syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier and the synthesist Voline. Again, however, the deafening silence in the text is women, with Goldman the sole female voice, but reduced to offering reflections on Kropotkin and Kronstadt.⁵¹ Three American anthologies both perpetuated and addressed these failures. Leonard Krimerman and Lewis Perry’s *Patterns of Anarchy* (1966) adopted a refreshingly open interpretation of anarchism, featuring individualist thinkers like Stephen Pearl Andrews, religious libertarians like Dorothy Day, and a section on critiques of anarchist theory.⁵² Marshall Shatz and Irving Horowitz’s editions were similarly varied, and although there was a continued weighting on Guérin’s ‘masters,’ they notably included Goldman’s work on sexual politics as a contribution in its own right.⁵³ The inadequacies of the anthology format were addressed recently in Robert Graham’s monumental two-volume documentary history of anarchist ideas, a book that not only places considerable emphasis on anarchism’s heritage of addressing

Monthly Review Press, 1970), 3.

⁵⁰ The original text was entitled *Ni Dieu ni maitre: anthologie de l’anarchisme* and was published in four volumes.

⁵¹ Daniel Guérin (ed.), *No Gods No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism: Book Two* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998), 163–208, 49–51, 104–119, 165–180. Goldman on Kropotkin can be found in Guérin, *No Gods No Masters: Volume One*, 287–294.

⁵² Leonard I. Krimerman and Lewis Perry (eds.), *Patterns of Anarchy: A Collection of Writings on the Anarchist Tradition* (New York: Anchor), 207–222, 372–378, 491–553.

⁵³ Marshall S. Shatz (ed.), *The Essential Works of Anarchism* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 312–355; Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.), *The Anarchists* (1964; London: Aldine Transaction, 2004), 266–283.

gender inequalities, but also strives to blast the canon open by challenging its Eurocentrism, including sections on anarchism in China and Latin America.⁵⁴

To survey all the works written on anarchism in the last fifty years is impossible, but from the précis above a number of themes emerge. Again, it is worth repeating that what historically has been a weakness in writing on anarchism is changing. In a sense, the very ability to reflect on the canon as a potentially problematic feature of our perception of anarchism presupposes a disenchantment that has already spurned a number of works. Certainly, from the brief flowering of anarchist histories informed by the democratising impetus of social history in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it is clear that resistance to reducing anarchism to a select band of thinkers is an established trend. Discussions of the canon, therefore, should not be cause for pessimism as such, but instead offer opportunities to reflect on how we engage with the historical tradition of anarchism and seek new ways to comprehend this protean set of ideas. More recently, the rise of transnational histories of anarchism, which appreciate the polyglot milieus in which anarchists are usually found, as well as the fecund international networks that spark innovations in anarchist ideas, is symbolic of the resistance to reductive approaches to the subject.⁵⁵ Similarly, it is possible to point to influential works on anarchism that imaginatively blend methodological perspectives from political theory with a keen historical sense, of which Benjamin Franks' *Rebel Alliances* is a good example.⁵⁶ And, while I have homed in on the supremacy of

⁵⁴ Robert Graham (ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Volume One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300CE to 1939)* (London: Black Rose Books, 2005), 236–252, 336–366, 319–335. See also Robert Graham (ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas: Volume Two: The Emergence of The New Anarchism (1939-1977)* (London: Black Rose Books, 2008).

⁵⁵ I am thinking of Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005); David Berry and Constance Bantman (eds.), *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: The Individual, the National and the Transnational* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (eds.), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870-1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Schmidt and van der Walt, *Black Flame*.

⁵⁶ Benjamin Franks, *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006).

political theory as one of the reasons for the canonisation of the ‘classical anarchists,’ it is worth pointing out that these works have done an impressive job of keeping anarchism alive in the scholarly imagination and posing many pertinent questions regarding how we understand this tradition. It should also be noted that it has not solely been the preserve of the historian to rescue neglected anarchists from obscurity and that important attempts have been made by those working broadly in the field of political theory to highlight the usefulness of reflecting on anarchism’s neglected actors.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, I think that it is justified to say that historical scholarship has been a noticeably minor aspect of the renewed interest in anarchism and that there is a strong connection between this and the solidity of the canon. In 1971, Nicolas Walter reflected on the likely development of anarchist studies and found cause for optimism:

In general, it looks as if during the 1970s we may expect further historical and biographical description of anarchism as a phantom of the past; we should also hope for more important (and more difficult) social and political analysis of anarchism as a spectre haunting the present; we may then look forward to a fresh expression of anarchism as a vision of the future.⁵⁸

His anticipation of a turn to the political analysis of anarchist ideas was borne out, but his rather dismissive appreciation of anarchist historical studies was not. Apart from an ephemeral flowering of work informed by social history and the current exciting emergence of transnational histories of anarchism, the field of anarchist history has been relatively barren. This is very noticeable in the context of anarchist ideas where, as to be expected, political theorists have spilt the most ink, and historians have been largely absent. Given the rich complexity of anarchism’s intellectual history, something that is either implicit or explicit in all the works surveyed here, it is surprising that

⁵⁷ A good example of this is Ruth Kinna, ‘Guy Aldred: Bridging the Gap between Marxism and Anarchism,’ *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16.1 (2011): 96–114. A similar intention can be seen in a number of the articles in the following edited collection: Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna (eds.), *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ Walter, ‘Anarchism in Print,’ 139.

there has not been a more pronounced movement in this direction.

INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY: NEW HISTORIES OF ANARCHIST IDEAS

For Goodway in 1989, growing familiarity with the methods of social history offered the prospect of novel approaches to anarchism's past. In reality, this pronouncement was rather after the event. Steps towards social histories of anarchism had already been taken, and by this time there was a new *enfant terrible* on the scene that was already displacing social history as the vogue sub-discipline: cultural history. While this trend has since become entrenched in mainstream historiography, in the context of anarchist history the new horizons it opened up have not been acknowledged.⁵⁹ And, with our present interest in the endurance of the canon, the general approach of cultural history offers a way of reconceptualising how we write about the 'masters' of anarchist theory. With this in mind, I want to briefly make a case for a blend of intellectual and cultural history in what follows, taking anarchist ideas as worthy objects of historical study, but sensitive to notions of political culture.⁶⁰ The upshot of this is, inevitably, an emphasis on the context in which ideas grow. This is a worthy quest and an objective that intellectual histories of anarchism usually affirm, denying the validity of considering 'works merely as self-contained texts' and emphasising the importance of placing 'thinkers and their works in their specific historical and personal context as well as in their broader traditions.'⁶¹ Often though, these contexts are seen as commonsensical and self-evident, meaning that appeals to the importance of contextual factors in appreciating anarchist intellectual history are rather weakly substantiated. What cultural history offers—as, indeed, did social history before it—is a fresh way to think about the contexts that inform the emergence of political ideas, and, as a result, suggest a path for new histories of anarchism.

⁵⁹ On cultural history's growth, see Peter Burke, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of Cultural History,' *Cultural History*, 1.1 (2012): 1–13.

⁶⁰ Generally, the terms 'intellectual history' and the 'history of ideas' are used interchangeably, with the former more frequently used nowadays. Here, I use both terms to refer to the same historical sub-discipline.

⁶¹ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), xiii.

Before this, however, it is worth noting the irony that while those writing on anarchism wring their hands over the exclusivity of their canon, a parallel discussion frequently takes place among mainstream intellectual historians regarding the 'canon of works to which we devote special attention.' The dynamic of this discussion is very similar, an anxiety over undue narrowness and fears regarding the potential 'exclusion of texts from other cultures,' but invariably, the historian is led to confess that 'most often I agree with traditional authorities in identifying works to be included in any . . . list of especially significant texts.'⁶² As anarchists puzzle over whether an unhealthy amount of attention is paid to Kropotkin, within the (admittedly rather elitist) confines of intellectual history he barely registers, and neither does anarchism, even in radical attempts to rethink the wider issue of canonisation.⁶³ While university library shelves strain under the weight of books on Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the literature on even the most prominent in the anarchist canon pales into insignificance.⁶⁴ Against this background, it might be asked whether the tendency towards canonisation in anarchist studies is really such an issue, especially if the treatment of Guérin's 'masters' is reflexive, conscious of the weaknesses of focusing on individuals, and realises that such an amorphous political doctrine as anarchism cannot be reduced to the pen strokes of a single figure. Similarly, if it is also recognised that

⁶² Dominick LaCapra, 'Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts,' in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (eds.), *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals & New Perspectives* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982), 51 [47–85].

⁶³ Consider Siep Stuurman, 'The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative,' *History and Theory* 39.2 (May 2000): 147–166. An important exception is J.W. Burrow's impressive *The Crisis of Reason*, which focuses heavily on Bakunin. Nevertheless, this analysis tends to dwell on his paeans for violence as symptomatic of a wider cult of irrationality in fin-de-siècle thought, instead of an analysis of his political ideas. Kropotkin, as he conceded in the preface, is not included in his study, and it is interesting to reflect on the fact that Kropotkin's scientific proclivities and his later move away from aggressive rhetoric would complicate the picture of anarchism presented: see J.W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), xiv.

⁶⁴ A rather unscientific indication of this can be seen using the university library catalogue aggregator copac (www.copac.ac.uk). Entering the search term 'Kropotkin' returns 202 results and 'Bakunin' 349, in comparison to 1,090 for 'Thomas Hobbes' and 2,696 for 'John Locke.'

any canon of works, as defined by Dominick LaCapra as those texts ‘to which we devote special attention’ rather than works of oracular value, must be built on correspondingly shifting sands, writing on the anarchist canon can still be a legitimate endeavour. Those writing on anarchist history are beholden to ponder the boundaries of this canon and should be conscious that the ethnocentrism and patriarchy predominating when it was forged influenced its composition, but if this is recognised, there remains much to be said about thinkers seen as canonical that are otherwise neglected in the mainstream.

That said, rethinking the approach to writing the history of anarchist ideas can help in looking beyond the confines of the canon, and resources for this re-evaluation can be found within intellectual history itself. Often, historical appreciations of anarchist ideas veer towards the ‘unit-idea’ method made famous in Arthur Lovejoy’s classic work *The Great Chain of Being* (1936). For Lovejoy, borrowing a metaphor from ‘analytic chemistry,’ the duty of the intellectual historian is to trace the individual ideas that comprise philosophical systems, often uncovering the truism that ‘philosophic systems are original or distinctive rather in their patterns than in their components.’⁶⁵ Changing sciences, Lovejoy then proposed that the role of the historian was principally Linnaean:

A study of sacred words and phrases of a period or . . . movement, with a view to clearing up their ambiguities, a listing of their various shades of meaning, and an examination of the way in which confused associations of ideas arising from these ambiguities have influenced the development of doctrines.⁶⁶

This taxonomic focus is a familiar feature of writing on anarchism, but the pursuit of the unit-idea can lack historical acuity. Ideas can become ‘hypostatized as an entity’, and doctrines presented as if ‘immanent in history’, leading to a tendency towards unhistorical comment on earlier ‘anticipations’

⁶⁵ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 3.

⁶⁶ Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 14. I am indebted to Abigail Williams’ discussion of Lovejoy’s work: see Abigail Williams, ‘Literary and Intellectual History,’ in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (eds.), *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 49–65.

of later ideas.⁶⁷ The habit of tracing an ‘anarchist ‘tendency’ as far back as Lao Tzu in the ancient world,’ which has an impressive lineage in anarchist studies given Kropotkin’s faith in it, risks such ahistoricism.⁶⁸ Rather, historically grounded writing on anarchism should be more sensitive to the social, cultural, and intellectual contexts in which these ideas grew, thinking more broadly about the particular problems to which anarchist writers were responding. Ironically, given intellectual history’s steadfast commitment to its own canon, this approach has the potential to overcome the narrow concentration on a select band of thinkers:

It is hard to see how we can hope to arrive at . . . historical understanding if we continue . . . to focus our main attention on those who discussed the problems of political life at a level of abstraction and intelligence unmatched by . . . their contemporaries. If on the other hand we attempt to surround these classic texts with their appropriate ideological context, we may be able to build up a more realistic picture of how political thinking in all its various forms was in fact conducted in earlier periods.⁶⁹

For mainstream intellectual history, such a contextualist approach requires the historian to think more widely about the prevailing discourses relevant to a given political thinker and to look to marginal and neglected texts to provide a deeper intellectual context.⁷⁰ To understand the thrust of the political

⁶⁷ Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding,’ 10, 11.

⁶⁸ Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, xiv. The counter position to this is well set out in Schmidt and van der Walt, *Black Flame*, 33 *passim*.

⁶⁹ Quentin Sinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), xi.

⁷⁰ It is worth noting that this approach to intellectual history differs slightly from that pursued by prominent historians like Peter Gay and H. Stuart Hughes. While both are interested in the context in which ideas grow, their focus on the *zeitgeist* differs from the specificity of contextualist intellectual history. As Gay wrote in the introduction to his seminal *The Enlightenment*, ‘The narrow Enlightenment of the philosophes was embedded in a wider more comprehensive atmosphere, the atmosphere of the eighteenth century, which may be called, without distortion, the Age of the Enlightenment. It was from this age that the philosophes drew ideas and support, this age which they partly led, partly epitomized, and partly rejected’: Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom* (1969; London: W.W. Norton, 1997), x. In a similar vein, consider H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness & Society*:

classics, the argument goes, it is necessary to uncover the historically defined issues that motivate an author, which are often not the timeless meditations on the human condition emphasised by political philosophy, but concerns that are more parochial. What this also provides is a bridge between theory and practice, a perennial cause for concern with anarchist writers, for the emphasis is on striving to understand the issues that define political life in the first place and therefore warrant written intervention.⁷¹

A practical effect of the contextualist method is greater sensitivity to the motivations for political engagement, manifested in a more developed awareness of the ephemeral literature that comprises a thinker's intellectual universe, texts to which they are responding either implicitly or explicitly. This has the potential to nuance our perceptions of the canon in anarchism, rather than rejecting it by posing fresh and potentially illuminating questions concerning a thinker's relation to their immediate environment. Traditionally, this has been something of a weakness in scholarship on anarchism, and the political theorist's tendency to view anarchism in terms of its relation to contemporary issues often abstracts thinkers from the issues they were really facing. A couple of examples from Kropotkin's work help illuminate this point. While Hobbes, T.H. Huxley, and Rousseau are frequently referenced in relation to Kropotkin's *chef-d'oeuvre* *Mutual Aid*, Henry Maine's name is probably less familiar. Yet *Mutual Aid* draws heavily on Maine's prodigious scholarship on legal history, which was itself a frequently cited body of work in the Victorian intellectual world.⁷² Alone this poses tantalising questions about Kropotkin's use of source material in the construction of *Mutual Aid*, considering his deep antipathy to legal conventions and Maine's belief in it as a benchmark of civilization, something compounded by Kropotkin's unhesitating praise for the Oxford professor. Contemplating the shared assumptions between these thinkers casts light on Kropotkin's philosophy, as does musing on the divergences.

The Reorientation of European Social Thought: 1890-1930 (1958; Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979). For this general point, I am indebted to Robert Darnton, 'Intellectual and Cultural History,' in Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 340 [327-353].

⁷¹ Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, xi.

⁷² Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid* (1904; London: Penguin, 1939), 76, 107, 107n, 113n, 114, 117, 118, 131n, 190.

Furthermore, given that Maine is sometimes shuffled into the canon of ‘anarcho-capitalists,’ does this cast any light on the vexed relationship between this brand of thought and the mainstream anarchist movement?⁷³ Or, consider Toulmin Smith, another figure who Kropotkin lavished praise on in *Mutual Aid*, and who has acquired an equally ambiguous political reputation, depicted variously as a premature ‘Thatcherite’ libertarian, traditional Tory, and committed mutualist.⁷⁴ Indeed, with its rich referencing, *Mutual Aid* offers a unique opportunity in Kropotkin’s oeuvre to recreate the intellectual framework of this text, to explore the sources on which his political sociology rested, and understand Kropotkin’s relation to the wider intellectual culture in which he lived. Even in the best histories of anarchism, this has tended to be overlooked given the historians’ desire to chart the vicissitudes of anarchist theory and rescue this political doctrine from distortion and obscurity. To gain a clearer insight into their work, however, developing a durable context is vital:

We cannot gain a proper understanding of Arnold or Mill or Spencer without an appreciation of the assumptions they shared with their contemporaries, and of the ways in which they differed from them—how, for instance, they used familiar political vocabularies for new and unexpected purposes.⁷⁵

Substitute Kropotkin, or Bakunin, or Tucker, for the thinkers mentioned above and some of the deficiencies of anarchist history become apparent. While histories of anarchism have contributed a significant amount to unearthing the complexities and ambiguities of this tradition, they have been weaker at tying together an appreciation of anarchism with a view of the wider intellectual and cultural contexts that gave its theorists their élan in the first place.

A legitimate criticism of this intellectual history approach is

⁷³ Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 7, 25.

⁷⁴ Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, 142n, 144n, 161n, 163n, 209; Ben Weinstein, ‘“Local Self-Government Is True Socialism”: Joshua Toulmin Smith, the State and Character Formation,’ *English Historical Review* CXXIII.54 (2008): 1195 [1193–1228].

⁷⁵ H.S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), xi.

that although it may illuminate the philosophical foundations of anarchism, it tends to fetishise theory. It might add texture to the canon, but it overlooks the fact that not all those identifying as anarchists paused to pen pamphlets. Heiner Becker and Nicolas Walter made this point in their brief article on the history of *Freedom Press*, noting that ‘historians . . . tend to concentrate on the easy things: the big names and the great events, the organisations and periodicals which last for a long time, the pamphlets and books which can be found in libraries.’⁷⁶ Contextualist intellectual history does offer a route out of this pursuit of ‘easy’ answers, by privileging the use of minor literature to build a more comprehensive contextual framework.⁷⁷ Perhaps an even more helpful way to approach this contextual problem, however, is to turn to perspectives offered by cultural history to re-evaluate these contexts. ‘New cultural history,’ so called to distinguish it from its Burckhardtian forbear with its bias for high culture, was shaped by a passing engagement with anthropology and places particular emphasis on the importance of symbolic practice, representation, and in a sense, Weberian *Verstehen*.⁷⁸ In contrast to the relative austerity of intellectual history, cultural history has been accused of whimsicality by emphasising the subjective nature of experience and concerning itself with creation of cultural meaning by individuals and groups. Histories of table manners, collecting, and clothing are some of the more quirky examples of these new histories, but cultural history has also freshened intellectual history’s contextual conundrum.⁷⁹ ‘Political culture’ has emerged as a prominent concept in the study of political ideas, a characteristically loose term that seeks to comprehend the subjective element of political identification. Political culture thus refers to the ‘identity and boundaries of the community,’ and the site where various political discourses ‘overlap.’ Rather than taken as self-evident, ‘meaning’ is tied to this complex of values:

[Political culture] constitutes the meanings of the terms in

⁷⁶ Heiner Becker and Nicolas Walter, ‘Freedom: People and Places,’ in *Freedom: A Hundred Years* (London: Freedom Press, 1986), 4 [4–7].

⁷⁷ For a useful challenge to Skinner’s understanding of contextualism, consider Mark Bevir, ‘The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation,’ *Human Studies* 23.4 (Oct. 2000): 395–411.

⁷⁸ For a general overview of cultural history’s history, see Burke, *What is Cultural History?*

⁷⁹ Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 58, 59, 68.

which . . . claims are framed, the nature of the contexts to which they pertain, and the authority of the principles according to which they are pressed, and which these claims are formulated, the strategies by which they are pressed, and the contestations to which they give rise.⁸⁰

While in the nineteenth century cultural history conceived culture as a body of learning and ‘high art,’ this perspective on culture emphasises the centrality of shared meanings and actors’ attempts to define their own communities of meaning. In polemical terms, the upshot of this is a resistance to the Marxian underpinning of social history, which tended to see values as an ‘efflux’ of material conditions. Instead, cultural historians often stress the autonomous nature of values, and point to the power of these in motivating action in the social sphere at some remove from material factors. The validity of this critique is a moot point and not one to be explored here, but the renewed focus on the idea of self-definition and personal identification offers an intriguing way of approaching the study of political ideas that stresses the fluid and sometimes overlapping sources of political identity. For those thinking about anarchist history, this challenges the hermetic approach to the study of anarchism by attaching weight to interactions with representatives of other political traditions, and emphasising the process by which anarchists created their own political culture from a potpourri of prevailing ideas and values. As the example of Maine and Kropotkin suggests, these neglected relations are a potentially fruitful avenue to understanding anarchism’s past.

A further development of the cultural history of ideas is sensitivity towards non-textual contexts.⁸¹ Recognising the fact

⁸⁰ Keith Michael Baker, ‘Introduction,’ in Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, Volume 1: The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), xii [xi–xxiv].

⁸¹ Brian Cowan, ‘Intellectual, Social and Cultural History: Ideas in Context,’ in *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, 171–188 (esp. 180–183). I am aware of the Derridean pronouncement that ‘Il n’ya pas de hors-texte,’ which should not necessarily be taken ‘literally.’ In the present article, however, the distinction between textual and non-textual refers simply to the intellectual historians’ particular focus on political literature and the cultural historians’ more varied approach to source material. I take the comment on Derridean literalism from Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

that literary fragments do not constitute the *only* context in which to situate ideas, the role of the more elusive ‘values, prejudices, and expectations’ that sway historical actors comes to the fore. While these ‘cultural conventions’ are obviously engaged with textually, in practice there tends to be a difference between the kinds of source material privileged by the contextualist historian of political ideas and those that interest the cultural historian.⁸² To uncover the assumptions that comprise this framework of values, it is necessary to think more creatively about the material drawn upon, and think more expansively about the contexts in which we place anarchist ideas. Similarly, cultural history is often linked to a growing interest in form rather than simply the philosophical content of ideas. The parallel development of ‘book history,’ for instance, has placed particular emphasis on engagement with printed matter: ‘the book is not so much a category as a process: books happen; they happen to people who read them, reproduce, disseminate, and compose them.’⁸³ From the perspective of anarchist history, where newspapers are often short-lived, articles anonymous, publishing ventures the product of cooperation between multiple groups and authors, this is clearly a richer history than most. Again, Kropotkin’s work offers an illuminating example. Given that the liberal-minded journal *Nineteenth Century* was the conduit for most of Kropotkin’s major articles once he began his sojourn in Britain, the impact of this relationship upon his ideas themselves has not been scrutinised. How did the form of his arguments, the rhetorical construction of his writing, and the patina of these articles differ from his early publications and those intended primarily for anarchist audiences? One change is that Kropotkin began to draw on different examples in seeking to boost his persuasiveness, a process mirroring his physical journey from east to west. The imagery of Russian *mirs* was supplanted by the communalism of the French peasantry while living under the Third Republic, before Kropotkin drew on quainter examples of bicycle clubs and friendly societies in the context of Britain, then the most urbanised country in the world.⁸⁴ Form is therefore

⁸² Cowan, ‘Intellectual, Social, and Cultural History,’ 183.

⁸³ Leslie Howsam, *Old Books & New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 5. I am indebted to Catherine Feely for her advice on book history.

⁸⁴ This is briefly explored in Matthew S. Adams, ‘Rejecting the American Model: Peter Kropotkin’s Radical Communalism,’ *History of Political Thought* 36.3 (Autumn 2013).

something often overlooked in anarchist history, and while the social history of anarchism praised by Goodway pursued a parallel path, cultural history's fixation on representation and the multiple contexts that inform the growth and transmission of ideas marks a departure from the focus on 'structures or processes' beloved by social historians.⁸⁵ There is, of course, important overlap between these methodological approaches—it would be a distortion to accuse social historians of being uninterested in the matter of values—but the sometimes acrimonious conflicts between them have opened up useful ways to rethink our approach to understanding anarchism's history.

CONCLUSION

'O Reader! — Courage, I see land!'⁸⁶

In this article, I have attempted to avoid the embattled tone that often accompanies considerations of method. My intention was not to offer a 'defence' of history or, as with one recent collection, a manifesto for how it should be written.⁸⁷ Instead, it is motivated by a belief that anarchism's is a rich and varied history and by surprise that attention to this has been a somewhat sluggish aspect of the general revival of interest in anarchism. It is particularly apparent in the context of anarchism's intellectual history, the field where most activity might be expected, and where, in fact, there has been comparatively little innovation. That Woodcock's history of anarchism, with all its deep erudition and sparkling prose, remains unsurpassed, is symptomatic of this lack of historical attention.

It is this paucity of historical writing, I have argued, that helps explain the dominance of the canon in anarchist studies. The disciplinary ascendancy of political theory emboldened this concentration on a select band of thinkers as representative of the tradition, as the primary concern became conclusive definition and anarchism's status as a political ideology. Post-anarchism, one of the most significant developments in anarchism's recent

⁸⁵ Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History' in *Cultural and Social History*, Vol.1, No.1 (2004), 94-117.

⁸⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History, Volume III* (1837; London: Chapman and Hall, 1898), 288.

⁸⁷ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 2001); Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (eds.), *Manifestos for History* (London: Routledge, 2007).

intellectual history has, despite levelling critical attention at the conventional understanding of anarchism, done little to displace this tendency. Again, however, it is important to note that this is beginning to change. Historical sensitivity is now primarily an attribute of those not writing from an explicitly historical perspective, and the attempt to nuance understandings of anarchism through appeal to its more marginal actors is informed by a rejection of canonical thinking. Similarly, the exciting growth of transnational histories of anarchism demonstrates that what once may have been a weakness is starting to change. The fear then that anarchist studies was buying into a Carlylean 'great man' history by canonising a select group of thinkers overstates the case, and as this special issue testifies, resistance to this process is a well-established, and productive, theme.

Further attempts to move beyond canonistic thinking in scholarship on anarchism, and indeed attempts to offer fresh insights on those predominant members of this perceived elite, should be welcomed. Historical research offers tantalising opportunities in this direction. While those writing on anarchist matters have been focusing on the grand epistemological impacts of poststructuralist philosophy, the more modest developments in mainstream historical writing have passed by largely unobserved. Awareness of these insights is not a guarantor of worthwhile writing, and neither is it necessary to be aware of these disciplinary debates to offer new perspectives on anarchist ideas, but recent attempts to think anew about the nature of historical context and its relationship to political ideas have enlivened the study of mainstream events and movements. Like Goodway's praise for social history at the end of the 1980s, my statement on the benefits of the cultural history of ideas is no doubt belated; by the time Goodway was writing, social history had already been largely displaced by cultural history. Yet greater sensitivity to deepening the textual context of anarchist ideas, appreciating the cultural assumptions underpinning political arguments, being more aware of the form of rhetorical interventions and conscious of anarchists' attempts to fashion a distinctive political culture offers new ways to approach anarchism's history. Such 'thick description,' to borrow a phrase from anthropology much beloved by cultural historians, also presents the opportunity to rethink the canon as shorthand for anarchist philosophy, by rescuing overlooked influences from anonymity and recovering the debates that gave anarchism its theoretical élan in the first

place.⁸⁸ Then, rather than follow Lord Acton's suggestion to fellow-historian Mandell Creighton—'Advice to persons about to write History: Don't'—historical writing on anarchism might experience the kind of renaissance underway in the social sciences.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–10.

⁸⁹ John Emerich Edward Dalberg, Lord Acton, *Acton-Creighton Correspondence* (1887) 'Letter II,' *The Online Library of Liberty*: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/2254/212810>.