

Activism versus Criticism? The Case for a Distinctive Role for Social Critics

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This essay makes a distinction between the roles that activists and social critics can play in democratic societies and defends the separate tasks of a non-activist social critic. Drawing on Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings, I argue that non-activist social critics are better situated than activists to reach certain audiences, cultivate certain democratic capacities, and preserve their audience's agency while doing so. In Emerson's case, his concerns about his activist contemporaries led him to craft new ways of critically engaging his peers. At the same time, as Emerson's life also illustrates, non-activist critics are limited by their roles and must forgo some of their distinctive advantages in order to do activist work. Clarifying the scope of the social critic's role in this way helps critics to draw on the benefits of their position and avoid overstepping its constraints, thereby allowing them to more effectively promote political reform.

During the 1840s and early 1850s, as the movement to abolish slavery in the United States gathered steam, white New Englanders were increasingly called upon to commit themselves to the cause. Many of those who had not yet become vocal advocates, including Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Parker, began to lobby on behalf of abolition during this time (Garvey 2006; Gura 2008). However, other New Englanders were surprisingly reluctant. The writer and social critic Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had long expressed his opposition to slavery, explained his hesitation in an anguished journal entry: “I waked at night, & bemoaned myself,” he wrote, “because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of Slavery” (Emerson 1982, 8:316). Yet he did not wish to do so, he continued, because becoming a full-throated abolitionist would require “the desertion of [his] post”—that is, his role as a critic, “free[ing]... imprisoned thoughts, far back in the brain of man” (316).

Emerson ultimately decided that this desertion was necessary, and in the years leading up to the Civil War, he directly advocated for abolition (Gougeon 2010, 86–217). However, his journal entry raises the question of why Emerson believed he had to abandon his “post” in the first place. Couldn't he have continued his work as a critic while throwing himself behind abolitionism? More broadly, can't people be social critics and activists at the same time?

For most contemporary theorists, the answer to this question is an unequivocal “yes.” Much of the recent scholarship on social criticism has used “critic,” “activist,” and related terms interchangeably, highlighting their shared commitment to challenging the status quo (Shulman 2008a, 126–8; Walzer 1990, 7, 215;

see also Maxwell 2019, xi). Others have emphasized the fluidity of individuals' development, pointing to the fact that the same people have engaged in activism and social-critical work at various points in their lives (Gougeon 2012a; James 1994, 8–15; Mantena 2012; Shelby and Terry 2018, 5). Still others have seen the traditional privilege of the non-activist critic as damning and have suggested that activist work has rendered the practice of non-activist criticism obsolete (Balfour 1999; Spence 2020).

This essay turns against this recent trend. I build a case in favor of making a stronger distinction between the roles of activists and non-activist social critics. My argument rests on the fact that, in the process of engaging in their respective practices, activists and non-activist critics are perceived differently by the public, face different constraints, and generally have different short- and medium-term aims. Recognizing these differences, I contend, allows democratic actors to take advantage of the specific opportunities their positions provide them and, just as importantly, grapple with their limitations. Moreover, following Emerson's insight, I develop this argument even further. If activists and non-activist critics make use of the distinction between them to its fullest extent, they draw attention to a fundamental tension between their respective roles. This essay not only makes the case that social critics should utilize this separation to its fullest extent but also defends the view that a tension between critics and activists is productive for democratic societies.

This analysis builds on recent work that adopts a functionalist approach to democratic theory (Chambers 2018; Jäske and Setälä 2020; Warren 2017). This approach, which focuses on the problems political systems must solve to be considered democratic, disaggregates political practices—voting, deliberation, representation, organization, etc.—to study how these practices fulfill different democratic aims. Following this framework, I disaggregate the practices of activism and non-activist social criticism to show how

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they can fulfill different democratic functions while also highlighting the tensions between them. However, in focusing on the roles of critics and activists, rather than solely the practices of social criticism and activism, I push this framework in a new direction. As I argue, the obstacles to realizing democratic commitments lie not only in practices themselves but also in the complex relationships among different practitioners and between practitioners and the public. Thus, my treatment of criticism and activism brings a relational component that is largely missing in current functionalist democratic theory.

To support my case for a stronger distinction between the roles of social critics and activists, I draw on Emerson's life and writings. As I show, through his interactions with various groups of New England reformers, Emerson came to believe that there were important differences between political activism and the work he wanted to do. He noted that his contemporaries tended to interact with the public in dogmatic and didactic ways, rather than treating them as capable of directing their own self-transformation. As Emerson developed his own practice of social criticism, he took advantage of his distance from abolitionism to cultivate a different relationship with his audience. Specifically, he built on his acceptance among the propertied classes to recast the meaning of "ownership" in a way that would promote self-critique, and he experimented with his rhetorical style to challenge his audience's deference toward authority. These examples illustrate how non-activist critics can utilize their distinct social position to do work that activists are not well-situated to carry out.

At the same time, Emerson's life also exemplifies the constraints that non-activist critics face in advocating for social reform. As scholars have shown, the events of the 1840s and 1850s led Emerson to acknowledge the urgency of antislavery advocacy. Nevertheless, Emerson believed that he could not practice his form of social criticism and engage in political activism simultaneously. Therefore, to meet the exigencies of that political moment, Emerson increasingly set aside his work as a critic in favor of directly promoting abolition. As I argue, this shift did not represent a blurring of the line between activism and non-activist social criticism. Instead, Emerson's life illustrates how non-activist critics can only overcome the limitations of their role by assuming a different one altogether.

Reading Emerson's trajectory in this way places my account at odds with the vast majority of recent scholarship on Emerson's thought, which has sought to discredit the view that there is a tension between political activism and Emerson's social criticism (Gougeon 2010; Robinson 2004; von Frank 1998). Emerson, they argue, was not the "aloof" critic that he was made out to be by earlier interpreters of his thought; instead, his philosophy, social criticism, and direct political advocacy mutually informed one another (Levine and Malachuk 2011; Urbas 2020; Wirzbicki 2021). In my view, however, the contention that Emerson's social criticism was continuous with his activism unduly minimizes Emerson's and his

contemporaries' reflections on his abolitionism. This evidence suggests that, despite Emerson's growing conviction that collective resistance was necessary to end slavery, he never believed that activism was compatible with his "vocation." For this reason, Emerson's writings serve as a useful resource to explore the tension between activism and non-activist criticism.

However, while Emerson helps us see how critics might take advantage of this tension, we must move beyond his work to appreciate how this tension can be constructive for democratic societies as a whole. Unlike Emerson, I argue, activists and non-activist critics should both explicitly acknowledge how their roles enable and hinder them in distinct ways. When each set of actors respects these distinctions and utilizes them well, they can complement one another to more effectively push for reform.

CRITICS, ACTIVISTS, AND DEMOCRATIC ROLES

My argument about the relationship between critics and activists rests on certain assumptions about social criticism, activism, and the place of these practices in democratic societies. In this essay, I use the term *social criticism* to mean a practice that is concerned with identifying unjust or dysfunctional social relations and advocating systemic change to rectify them. Understood in this way, the term *social criticism* encompasses both activism and non-activist social criticism. Activists, like other social critics, call attention to the pathologies of their societies; they also seek to cultivate the public's critical faculties, motivate them to change their behavior, and build their capacity to act on their convictions. Given these connections, it is unsurprising that contemporary scholars have tended not to distinguish between activists and critics, using encompassing terms like *prophet* and *transformative truth-teller* (Maxwell 2019; Shulman 2008a; Walzer 1990; 1993).

However, the fact of this overlap tends to obscure important differences between activist and non-activist social critics. First, activists have distinctive aims that generate a unique set of opportunities and constraints. Specifically, the practice of activism is directed toward creating new sites of power by mobilizing groups of people to engage in collective action (Inouye 2022; Pineda 2021; Woodly 2021). This goal of organizing for power, in turn, shapes the form, style, and content of activist work. For example, to mitigate the dangers individuals face when rebelling against the status quo, activists generally focus on reaching a critical mass of people at public demonstrations (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Likewise, to counter psychic impediments to action, activists often employ rhetorical techniques including denunciation to shame those who remain passive (Shulman 2008a).

By contrast, non-activist social critics, who do not adopt the aim of mobilizing for collective power, do not face the common constraints of activism, including working on tight deadlines, compromising with others, and dealing with the logistics and on-the-ground

consequences of mass action. Absent such requirements, these critics have certain opportunities that activists do not have, as I explore further in my examination of Emerson's work. At the same time, the choice not to engage in activism creates different constraints, including limiting their access to certain audiences and, often, minimizing their short-term political impact.

A second important distinction between activist and non-activist critics involves their public perception. Activists' goal of mobilizing for collective power not only encourages different tools and techniques of criticism but also shapes their self-understandings, identities, and social networks. Activists tend to identify themselves as such and take pride in the distinctive aspects of their work (Kutlaca, Zomeren, and Epstude 2020). Unsurprisingly, these relational and identity-based factors affect how the general public sees activists and their own association with them (Liu 2018). On the other hand, the public tends to perceive non-activist critics differently (Gougeon 2001, 174). These diverging perceptions influence the respective audiences that activist and non-activist critics can reach and the efficacy of their appeals.

To capture this nuanced understanding of the distinction between activist and non-activist critics, I focus on the differences between their *roles* rather than solely between the practices of activism and non-activist social criticism. The concept of a *role*, in my understanding, refers to all of the following elements: (1) the practice a person is engaged in; (2) the function(s) that practice plays in their society; (3) how that practitioner situates themselves in relation to their audience(s); (4) how that practitioner situates themselves in relation to other practitioners; and (5) how that practitioner conceives of each of these elements (i.e., their self-understanding as a practitioner). It is only through a consideration of all of these elements together that we can recognize how activist and non-activist critics differ and, more importantly, why these differences matter. As I argue, activists and non-activist critics can best complement one another's work when they take advantage of their distinctive roles.

This analysis of activism and social criticism is grounded in a problem-based approach to democratic theory. This approach, which has been elaborated most fully by Mark Warren (2017), identifies political systems as democratic not by the presence or absence of some concrete set of institutions or procedures but rather by the extent to which those systems achieve key normative aims of democratic societies: empowering inclusions, forming collective agendas, and developing people's capacities to make decisions. As many have argued, democratic practices like voting, representation, and deliberation each support some of these aims, but none of them can fulfill all of the functions that democracies require (Jäske and Setälä 2020; Warren 2017). Accordingly, theorists who have adopted this approach have disaggregated democratic systems into different practices to better appreciate their complementarities and the trade-offs and tensions between them (Chambers 2018; Disch 2011; Dryzek 2017; Klein 2022; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

Following this functionalist framework, this essay disaggregates the democratic practices of activism and non-activist social criticism. As I argue, activism is necessary to push for the empowered inclusion and equal standing of those living in a democratic society. However, as noted above, the pressures that activists face make it difficult for them to simultaneously pursue other democratic aims, such as encouraging independent critique and self-directed development (Rosenblum 1987).¹ Non-activist criticism has some opposite tendencies: it helps build the public's capacity to think for themselves, but it can also diminish the ability to act collectively. A healthy democracy encourages both of these practices but also recognizes their distinctiveness.

In my view, however, the current functionalist democratic framework cannot address many of the difficulties societies face in fulfilling democratic aims. Tensions exist not only among practices themselves but also among practitioners, between practitioners and their audiences, and in practitioners' self-conceptions. This web of social relations has consequences for the effects of a person's practice: for example, some groups of people might dismiss an author's work if they do—or do not—expressly align themselves with certain activists. To capture these tensions, functionalist democratic theory must extend beyond analyses of practices alone. In exploring the different *roles* that democratic actors play along with the practices they engage in, this essay aims to develop functionalist democratic theory in a new direction.

With this framework in mind, we can now turn to Emerson. As I argue, Emerson's life and writings are a constructive point of departure for three reasons: first, because his early reflections provide an example of how and why a social critic might distance themselves from activism; second, because his published writings and speeches develop one way in which a non-activist critic might take advantage of that distance; and finally, because his turn toward direct political advocacy late in his career highlights the importance of recognizing the limitations of non-activist criticism.² Below, I examine each in turn.

EMERSON VERSUS NEW ENGLAND REFORMERS: THE GENESIS OF A DISTINCTION

Emerson's conceptualization of the tension between activism and social criticism began early in his career in

¹ To be sure, activists can also support people's self-development. However, the process of self-development that activists tend to encourage, which is grounded in trust and solidarity with others (Lorde 1984, 101), is wholly distinct from the process of self-development that Emerson encouraged, which is based in skepticism and self-distancing. In the paper, I make the case for the value of Emerson's process of self-development.

² While Emerson is an instructive example of a non-activist critic, my aim in using him as an example is not to suggest that he is representative of all non-activist critics. I highlight some similarities and differences between Emerson and other non-activist critics in the concluding section of the paper.

response to the forms of activism that were prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century New England. While calls for reform were many and varied during this time, Emerson's interactions with three groups of activists—Unitarian preachers, utopian socialists, and Garrisonian abolitionists—are especially illustrative. In his observations and conversations with each of these sets of reformers, he identified a recurring pattern: activists inflated their moral, ethical, and epistemic authority, and minimized the independent agency of those whom they urged to join them. For Emerson, these tendencies had damaging and potentially far-reaching consequences, and he became increasingly vocal about them during his early career as a writer.³ Specifically, Emerson believed that they unwittingly reproduced a hierarchical model of social relations, retrenched their audience's deference toward authority figures, and, despite their intentions, failed to motivate audiences to play an active role in self-criticism and self-development.⁴

Emerson's first articulation of this issue can be found in his explanation of why he decided to leave his position as a Unitarian minister. Ministers, as Emerson described, were key activist figures in New England: they denounced social sins and urged parishioners to take part in reform movements, some of which the ministers themselves led. Emerson's misgivings about how Unitarian ministers played this role largely revolved around their emphasis on submission (Emerson 1982, 4:27, 46). For Emerson, demanding that parishioners adhere to the "dead forms of our forefathers" inculcated the view that people's moral intuitions were only valuable if they corresponded to something external to themselves (49). In addition, Emerson argued that ministers' dogmatic form of communication obviated the need for parishioners to engage in introspection. As Emerson wrote, believers "wander[ed] in the outer darkness in the skirts & shadows of [themselves]" (49). Yet it was only by teaching themselves, rather than by assenting to or imitating others, that people could truly be reformed:

every man must learn in a different way ... How much is lost by imitation. Our best friends may be our worst enemies. A man should learn to detect & foster that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within far more than the lustre of whole firmament without ... This thinking would go to show the significance of self-education; that in reality there is no other; for, all other is nought without this (49–50).

³ Notably, Emerson never explicitly condemned Black reformers, including Frederick Douglass, though explanations for why this is the case have varied. For a comparison of Emerson's and Douglass' anti-slavery advocacy, see Egan (2014) and Gougeon (2012b).

⁴ To be sure, activists are not the only set of critics who are vulnerable to these criticisms. Historically, non-activist critics have been as likely as activists to interact with their audiences in hierarchical ways. However, as I discuss in the concluding section, the demands of collective action often encourage activists to use the techniques Emerson censured.

This passage identifies one way in which—in Emerson's view—activists unwittingly undermined the self-development of their audiences. If "all true greatness ... come[s] from internal growth," then our "best friends"—in this case, the ministers who advocated for reform—are our "worst enemies" (49, 52), for they want to teach us what we can only teach ourselves.

For Emerson, a different, but equally worrying feature of his contemporaries' activism was their tendency to suggest that individuals were only capable of effecting change when they acted in concert. Emerson ascribed this view to the members of Brook Farm, a utopian community founded by his friends in 1841. In prioritizing mutual dependence, Emerson worried, Brook Farmers would not feel personally answerable for the group's failures—or for the problems facing those outside of the Farm (7:407–8). In addition, Emerson predicted that the Farm's emphasis on collective power would exacerbate members' belief that they were impotent on their own (7:408). For Emerson, these concerns about Brook Farm activists were damning because they undercut several preconditions for social reform: individuals' willingness to see their own role in perpetuating social injustice, their motivation to initiate difficult work on their own, and their belief in their own efficacy absent a sizable like-minded community.

Finally, Emerson's remarks on another group of reformers—Garrisonian abolitionists—reveals a third set of concerns about the work of mid-nineteenth-century activists. On the one hand, Emerson admired the eloquence of these charismatic antislavery orators, and he praised them for being "inestimable workers on audiences" (8:282). On the other hand, Emerson connected their charisma to a lack of epistemic humility. Emerson drew attention to this dynamic in an 1841 journal entry on a conversation he had with the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison:

I told Garrison that I thought he must be a very young man ... who can afford to think much and talk much about the foibles of his neighbors, or 'denounce' and play 'the son of thunder' as he called it. We want to be expressed, yet you [Garrison] take from us War ... Well, now you take from us our cup of alcohol as before you took our cup of wrath. We had become canting moths of peace, our helm was a skillet, and now we must become temperance water-sops. You take away, but what do you give me (8:116)?

Emerson intimates that the role Garrison played in relation to would-be reformers is that of a severe parent to wayward children: Garrison articulated the standard of what is good and evil and scolded all those who failed to live up to that standard. Garrison's audience, by contrast, was not empowered to condemn Garrison's failures. In Emerson's view, no matter how successful this "son of thunder" act was in rallying listeners to a cause, it failed to treat them as competent authors of their own lives. Moreover, in the longer term, Emerson indicated, relying on denunciation and shaming failed to inspire a sustained commitment to self-examination (8:116). As Emerson wrote in *Representative Men*, "the

excess of influence” of leaders like Garrison is dangerous: “His attractions warp us from our place. We have become underlings” (Emerson 1983b, 627). For this reason, Emerson insisted, “true genius seeks to defend us from itself” (623).

In sum, Emerson’s interactions with New England activists led him to conclude that, in advocating for their causes, reformers tended to adopt modes of address and promote views that minimized their audiences’ independent critical agency. This conclusion convinced Emerson of the difference between his “vocation”—his work as a non-activist critic—and that of his contemporary reformers. In addition, as I develop in the following section, it led Emerson to strategize about and carefully craft his social criticism to cultivate a different kind of relationship with his audiences—one which would actively encourage them to lead their own critical development.⁵ To do so, I argue, he utilized resources that were only available to him as a result of his distance from his activist peers.

EMERSON AND THE ADVANTAGES OF A SOCIAL CRITIC’S POSITION

Emerson’s Insider Advantage: Recasting Property Ownership as Self-Ownership

One example of how Emerson crafted his practice of criticism with his relationship to his audience in mind is his treatment of the term “property ownership.” Over the course of his essays and lectures, Emerson redefined this term from its existing meaning—material ownership of “things”—to a newer one that would have the more spiritual connotation of self-command.⁶ This redefinition of property ownership as self-ownership, I argue, was not the same form of critique that Emerson’s contemporaries practiced: he was not primarily interested in having his audiences agree with or imitate him. Rather, he aimed to encourage a transformation in how they related to themselves and, more specifically, to persuade his peers that developing their critical capacities was crucial to their personal fulfillment. In Emerson’s view, if this practice of self-development became more widespread, substantial reforms—like

the abolition of slavery—would have a more auspicious social foundation.

Emerson targeted the meaning of “ownership” for special scrutiny because he saw prevailing attitudes toward property as a pivotal—and also problematic—part of the American ethos. In his view, white Americans had come to identify ownership not with providing for oneself or cultivating the land but with simply having things at one’s disposal. Emerson proclaimed this view in a well-known passage of his most famous essay, “Self-Reliance”: “Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that... they measure their esteem of each other by what each has, and not by what each is” (Emerson 1983b, 281). For Emerson, this attitude toward property ownership was not only aesthetically repugnant but, more troublingly, detrimental to his audiences’ critical capacities. Emerson intimated that all individuals who depend on their “magazine of old and new chattels” are tamed and civilized people who are driven to vote and act in favor of their material interests (141). When these interests conflict with their moral convictions, they generally revise the latter to fit the former.⁷ Moreover, as possessions require protection from the state, property holders usually establish a fundamentally symbiotic and quietist relationship to political authority. In a telling move, Emerson consistently identified political conservatism with men who are “timid, and merely defensive of property” (565). Thus the propertied man who, to an earlier set of theorists, seemed to be the very embodiment of independence⁸ is derided by Emerson as a slave to his possessions (141).

Emerson also connected this understanding of material ownership to the institution of slavery. First, as Jack Turner has developed, Emerson noted that the fortunes of Northerners were founded on slave labor (Turner 2012, 32). Second, Emerson suggested that this attitude toward physical ownership extended to the treatment of enslaved people (Emerson 2008, 146).⁹ For Emerson, then, his audiences’ views about property ownership were significant obstacles to both personal and social progress.

Despite his concerns, however, Emerson did not abandon the term *ownership* altogether. As Neal Dolan has noted, it is peculiar that the term should show up in Emerson’s writings at all; at first blush, economic expressions appear out of place in the works of the founder of American transcendentalism (Dolan 2011,

⁵ My account of Emerson’s views on self-led critical development parallels Dana Villa’s defense of “Socratic citizenship” in certain respects (2001). However, while Villa’s work exclusively addresses non-activist figures, I emphasize the relationship between two groups who seek to challenge both existing norms and practices (activists and non-activist critics), and I explore both the advantages and the limitations of their respective positions.

⁶ Many Emerson scholars have analyzed his practice of redefinition, showing how Emerson uses the linguistic construction of his texts to challenge traditional meanings of words and concepts. However, these scholars have generally concluded that this practice is self-oriented, revealing the incommunicability of Emerson’s “world within” (Poirier 1985) and making his prose primarily “in conversation with itself” (Cavell 1979, 176). By contrast, I see Emerson’s redefinitions as socially oriented attempts to reconfigure the relationship between himself and his audiences.

⁷ Jack Turner discusses Emerson’s view of moral self-justifications at length (2012, 29–33).

⁸ In classical liberal thought, the property-owner is seen as most optimally positioned for enlightened critique of the state, for he achieves the proper balance between independence of means and interest in the stability of the social order (Habermas 1989, 27–56, 87). Emerson, by contrast, sees conventional property-owners as effete, seduced by their belongings into complicity with the status quo.

⁹ The primary example Emerson uses to highlight and denounce this connection is of Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster. Emerson suggests that Webster’s willingness to compromise with Southern slaveholders, particularly in regard to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, was connected to Webster’s fixation on protecting private property (Emerson 2008, 146).

345). Yet Emerson recognized the power and potential of a concept that had such a strong hold on the American psyche.¹⁰ Instead of disparaging the idea of ownership altogether, he redefined its meaning in the service of his own social-critical project—namely, to encourage his audience’s critical self-development.

The central shift in Emerson’s transformation of the term *property* is from ownership as physical possession to ownership as mental command. Emerson makes this shift in his 1837 lecture “Human Culture,” where he presents a hierarchy of different kinds of ownership. At the bottom, he contends, is legally protected property rights—the “walls and muniments of possession” (Emerson 2005, 61). At the top is “Insight,” which takes a mental ownership of land and goods, thereby “leaving the so-called proprietor undisturbed” (61). As Emerson indicates elsewhere, this shift from external to internal redefines the “true” meaning of property ownership as ownership of *oneself*, rather than ownership of things (Emerson 1983b, 16). Further, if taking possession of things means taking them up in our minds, then improving our minds is the highest meaning of ownership. Emerson concludes that we cannot own ourselves unless we constantly remake ourselves—that is, unless we direct our continual moral and intellectual growth. This process consists in subjecting himself to principled scrutiny:

I think we must clear ourselves each one by the interrogation, whether we have earned our bread to-day by the hearty contribution of our energies to the common benefit? and we must not cease to tend to the correction of these flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day (145).

By “laying one stone aright every day,” the self-owning individual directs his own critical development while also contributing to social reform.

Overall, Emerson’s redefinition of the concept of ownership illustrates how he adapted his practice of social criticism to encourage his audiences’ self-led critical development. In addition, it shows how this self-development serves a democratic function: as a direct contrast to material ownership, self-ownership would divert his audiences away from beliefs and behavior that supported slavery.

At the same time, it also reveals how Emerson used his position as a non-activist to facilitate his social-critical project. Specifically, Emerson took advantage of his status as an insider among his audience members to build the case for self-ownership. As theorists like Michael Walzer have argued, being an insider confers certain advantages to a social critic: those who are most connected to their audience’s lives are in the best

position to remind them of long-standing commitments that conflict with the unjust social practices they perpetuate, and those who see the critic as a member of their own community are more likely to take seriously and engage with the critic’s remarks (Walzer 1993, 35).¹¹ In Emerson’s case, his essays and lectures largely addressed those who were similar to him: white, property-holding, educated Northerners.¹² Emerson used his intimate knowledge of his peers to portray what property ownership had come to mean to them and to redirect them toward a new self-orientation. Moreover, the fact that Emerson was an accepted member of this group meant that his criticism could not be easily dismissed as the grievances of an envious person; Emerson had access to everything his more privileged audience members had. This position made it more likely for those who saw him as a peer—or aspired to become one—to give his work a considered hearing.

These advantages, it may be argued, are connected to Emerson’s identity as a prominent New Englander rather than to his distance from activism as such. Emerson did not give up his elite social status or the benefits it conferred when he ultimately aligned himself with the abolitionists he had earlier censured. Yet Emerson’s earlier aloofness from social reform movements, which was frequently remarked upon at the time (Gougeon 2001, 176), made him more attractive to the members of his audience who were most guilty of the charges Emerson leveled against property-owners. For them, the juxtaposition of Emerson’s critiques of the status quo and the admonitions of Garrisonians and temperance preachers made Emerson’s views appear more moderate and reasonable by comparison.¹³ Since many white, wealthy New Englanders were unsympathetic to or apathetic about activists’ efforts, it is not clear that Emerson’s “known *unconnection*” (Gougeon 2001, 176) to the abolitionist movement lost the movement many potential adherents. Rather, it seems that, of any approaches to challenging the status quo, Emerson’s was most likely to reach this audience. Moreover, given that white property-owners held considerable political power, even if Emerson’s influence on their

¹⁰ Like Dolan, I see Emerson’s “language of property” as employed to “appeal affirmatively to his post-revolutionary audience’s hard-won, proudly held legal right to own things” (Dolan 2011, 345). But whereas Dolan understands this language to serve as a remedy for social maladies including an excessive focus on commercial enterprise, I see his “ownership terminology” as part of his broader reworking of the practice of social criticism.

¹¹ I do not deny that people who have been marginalized by certain communities (“outsiders”) can be important and effective critics of those communities. Perceptive work on this topic by Balfour (1999), Bromell (2018), and Maxwell (2019, 9–12), among others, has argued that marginalized critics are generally better able to see the real character of a community than “insiders” are. That said, many marginalized critics have expressed little hope in their ability to change the perspectives of the people who marginalized them in the first place. By contrast, many hope that their work will have a notable effect on those who have been marginalized in similar ways. In this sense, then, both marginalized and “insider” critics tend to place their greatest hopes in their influence on people who accept them as peers.

¹² For more on the identities of Emerson’s audiences and readers, see Wier (2000).

¹³ See, for example, George E. Ellis’ positive review of Emerson’s *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (1849, 461). Ellis was a white, property-owning, Unitarian clergyman who was not attracted to the activism of Emerson’s abolitionist peers.

perspectives was limited, any shift in their openness to change could impact the success of progressive causes.

More broadly, in Emerson's view, the only society that could meet the demands of democratic citizenship was one whose members were willing to subject themselves to self-interrogation and were open to growth and change. Thus, encouraging this critical self-development—especially among white propertied men, who were most reluctant to do so—helped to foster the necessary preconditions for future social reform. As Emerson's distance from contemporary activists gave him more leeway to tailor his approach to white elites, Emerson shows how a non-activist critic's social position can help facilitate their work.¹⁴

Room for Rhetorical Innovation: Emerson's "Labyrinths of Beautiful Contradictions"¹⁵

A second way in which Emerson crafted his criticism to fulfill aims that activists were not well-situated to pursue was by experimenting with his rhetorical approach. As was indicated in Emerson's criticisms of contemporary reformers, he believed that the manner in which activists addressed their audiences perpetuated hierarchical social dynamics and stymied audiences' desire to engage in independent thinking. In redefining property ownership as self-ownership, Emerson hoped to motivate his audiences to play a more active role in their critical development. At the same time, however, this redefinition did not, in and of itself, require Emerson's audiences to see Emerson as any less of a moral authority than they saw Garrison. To address this, Emerson needed to counteract his audience's reflexive deference—especially their deference to someone like Emerson, an internationally renowned white male intellectual. He attempted to do so, I argue, by provoking his audiences to adopt a searching—and even skeptical—posture toward the views he presented. By interpolating his audience in his writings and lectures, Emerson decentered his authority, placing the responsibility for practicing critique in their hands.

To make his audiences active participants in his social criticism, Emerson used a rhetorical strategy that presented them with a series of conflicting claims. The form this strategy took ranged from a more conventional and explicit contrast between opposing views to a subtler vacillation between opinions that are in tension with one another. On the former end is Emerson's lecture "The Conservative." This lecture, which maps out the viewpoints of two parties—"the party of Conservatism" and the "party of Innovation"—is structured in such a way as to prolong the process of evaluation. Emerson spends the vast majority of the lecture juxtaposing the opinions of the parties without definitively ruling in favor of either side. In rebuking

each party, Emerson casts himself as an outsider who, rather than seek to convince his audience of either side, wants them to be more discerning about all of the views they are presented with.

Further, Emerson extends the impression that his audience members are the arbiters between two opposing viewpoints by placing much of the lecture's content in the mouths of two representative men, the Conservative and the Innovator, who argue directly with one another. Emerson metaphorically transforms his lecture into a play in which the two men are on stage and Emerson has joined his audience as a spectator. Emphasizing his shared position with his audience as an observer, Emerson declares, "we must hear the parties speak as parties" (Emerson 1983b, 176). This rhetorical move is another way for Emerson to enlist his audience in critique: watching the theatricalized conflict unfold, his audience members must decide for themselves the merit of each side's views.

Only in the concluding paragraphs of "The Conservative" does Emerson give his own verdict on the clash between conservatism and innovation. Before doing so, however, he again reiterates the importance of audience members deciding for themselves:

If it still be asked in this necessity of partial organization, which party on the whole has the highest claims on our sympathy? I bring it home to the private heart, where all such questions must have their final arbitrement. How will every strong and generous mind choose its ground, — with the defenders of the old? or with the seekers of the new (187)?

Emerson himself ultimately lauds "the new." At the same time, he insists that his understanding of "the new" transcends the partiality of either the typical Reformer or Conservative (189). This summative judgment leaves the reader the interpretive space to make their own evaluations and carve out their own positions. Moreover, delaying this judgment to the very end of the lecture makes it more likely that his audience will have begun their deliberation before Emerson's verdict is available to guide them. Thus, "The Conservative" is one example of how Emerson used rhetorical techniques to provoke the active engagement of his audience.

In other writings, Emerson went even further with this approach. Rather than present clashing viewpoints in the mouths of (fictional) others, he oscillated among contradictory positions in his own voice. Judith Shklar, in her famous commentary on Emerson's *Representative Men*, describes this style of exposition as a "zig-zag movement" (2011, 58). According to Shklar, *Representative Men* captures Emerson's simultaneous admiration for remarkable talent and his commitment to the democratic ethos of equality. Holding both of these views presents a dilemma: favoring men of genius veers toward upholding hierarchy, yet insisting on equality denies the excellence of singular men. Rather than advancing one view at the expense of the other, Shklar notes, Emerson alternates between them, presenting evidence for each in quick succession:

¹⁴ While white Northerners were Emerson's primary audience, non-activist criticism does not exclusively address social elites. I discuss this point further in the concluding section.

¹⁵ This quote is from a contemporary review of Emerson's "Divinity School Address" (Gilman 1838, 100–6). Quoted in Myerson (1992, xii).

Nature exists for excellence (up), but anyone who is good among us qualifies (down). Do the great raise our sights? Yes, they do (up), but they are a part of all humanity, else they could not reach us (down). If they see things more quickly and before others do (up), we all can see eventually (down) (58).

Shklar contends that this zig-zag movement mirrors an internal conflict in Emerson's political thought: as there is no way to fully reconcile both views, *Representative Men* simply displays their inherent tension. While this may be the case, Shklar's contention ignores the rhetorical dimension of Emerson's writing style. Even if Emerson was conflicted, why present the conflict to his audience in this manner?

One notable implication of Emerson's "zig-zag movement" is that it invites the reader into the conflict at hand. Just as in "The Conservative," two opposing views are offered to the reader without any immediate resolution. Unlike in "The Conservative," however, the fact that Emerson holds these views at the same time challenges Emerson directly. If Emerson is undecided on an issue—if he appears to vacillate—his reliability is in question. Far from undermining Emerson's vision for critique, however, this challenge reinforces it: on his account, no one, not even Emerson himself, ought to be turned to for ultimate guidance on matters of moral, social, and political importance. "Zig-zagging," then, contributes to Emerson's alternative form of critique by encouraging the reader to be guided by his own judgment. Overall, by calling his own competency as a critic into question, Emerson hopes to trigger in his audience a skeptical mindset that will carry over to consideration of other beliefs and practices.¹⁶

As with his redefinition of property ownership, Emerson's innovative rhetorical style also illustrates how he used the resources of his position as a non-activist to support his social-critical aims. First, his writings demonstrate how working alone, as critics tend to do, rather than working in concert with others, as most activists do, facilitated his efforts. In sole-authored pieces like "The Conservative" and *Representative Men*, it was easy for Emerson to model his serpentine process of internal deliberation and critique. By contrast, when activists communicate to the public, they are often pressed to present the consensus they reached in their collective reflections, not the process of getting there. Thus, the manner in which Emerson crafted his criticism—i.e., on his own—is well-tailored to the process-focused, individual-oriented approach that Emerson believed was crucial to the project of self-education.

¹⁶ Evidence from other work supports my claim that this inconsistency is a strategic choice, rather than a spontaneous result. In *Representative Men*, for example, Emerson condemns audiences for being "too passive in the reception" of ideas communicated by "great men," and calls on public figures to "abolish [themselves] and all heroes" (1983b, 623, 627). Combined with Emerson's self-reflections about not inspiring any "followers" (1982, 14:258), these statements suggest that Emerson intentionally tried to "abolish himself" in his social criticism.

Similarly, the most common forms that social criticism takes—essays and long-form writing—are better vehicles to confound and perplex audiences than the forms of communication that activists use. In speaking to the broader public, activists generally stake out a clear stance on their motivations and aims. Doing so is crucial not only for attracting others to their cause but also for leveraging the power of the collective to press for concrete reforms. By contrast, puzzling their audiences via self-contradictions or equivocal criticisms of different sides would undermine what activists were trying to achieve. Yet this puzzlement—at least in Emerson's view—plays an important part in the process of questioning entrenched beliefs and popular authority figures. As critics can more easily provoke perplexity in their essays and lectures than activists can in their speeches, political actions, and manifestos, critics have an advantage over activists in cultivating this form of critical self-development.

Finally, the differences between critics' and activists' primary audiences help to strengthen the potential impact of Emerson's rhetorical approach. Given the modes and forums in which they communicate, non-activist critics largely reach audiences that have the material resources to engage in sustained self-reflection. In some ways, this audience can be seen as a limiting factor: such audiences do not include the most marginalized and impoverished parts of the public.¹⁷ At the same time, this privilege affords such audience members the time and ability to work through their puzzlement and develop their own practice of critique. Thus, those who are in the best position to respond to Emerson's social criticism are also the people who are most likely to read Emerson's work and seek out his lectures.

Overall, these examples of Emerson's social criticism help us to see how social critics can perform a role that others are not well-positioned to pursue: namely, encouraging a process of critical development grounded in self-initiated exploration and skepticism toward established authority. In addition, these examples illustrate why the differences between non-activist critics and activists are useful. As I have argued, it is by virtue of Emerson's distance from his activist peers that he was better able to fulfill the aims of his "post."

THE LIMITATIONS OF A SOCIAL CRITIC'S POSITION: ABOLITIONISM REVISITED

Distance from activism, however, does not only empower critics; it also limits them. Non-activist critics are not well-positioned to do much of the work activists are best at—namely, mobilizing the public to support a cause via political action. Emerson's development in the Antebellum period from social critic to abolitionist is an instructive example of why this is the case. Specifically, as I argue in this section, Emerson's growing

¹⁷ This is not to say that all non-activist critics' audiences are wealthy or white.

recognition of the urgency of the abolitionist cause, as well as the insufficiency of his social criticism to address it, led Emerson to repeatedly set aside his social-critical work in favor of direct political advocacy. The shift Emerson made during this time clarifies why non-activist criticism cannot do all of the critical work necessary for democratic societies on its own.

In advancing this position, I depart from the prevailing interpretation of Emerson's political trajectory. Scholarship of the past two decades has generally rejected the view—put forward in the 1980s and 1990s (Kateb [1995] 2002; Poirier 1985; West 1989)—that there is a tension between Emerson's social criticism and abolitionism. Beginning in the late 1990s, scholars began to uncover a wider scope of Emerson's political engagement than had previously been identified (Gougeon 2001; 2010; Robinson 2004; von Frank 1998). While Emerson had occasionally advocated on behalf of political causes in the 1830s, these actions were relatively rare during this period (Emerson 2004, 27–32). Prior to the 1840s, Emerson appears to have been optimistic that his efforts, along with the benevolent direction of history, would alone suffice to bring about the outcomes activists lobbied for—without the undesirable effects of their rhetorical strategies (Emerson 1982, 14:404–5). However, the events of the 1840s and 1850s eroded his confidence that the eventual abolition of slavery was guaranteed. As Len Gougeon has argued, the expansion of slavery into Western territories, the admission of these territories into the Union as slaveholding states, and the vocal abolitionism of his close friends and family were key factors that prompted Emerson to research the conditions of slaves across the Western Hemisphere (Gougeon 2001, 176–9). This research, which underscored that slavery was the lynchpin of the global economy, further compounded Emerson's concern that more needed to be done for the abolitionist cause to succeed.

To this end, in the mid-1840s, Emerson began to engage in direct political advocacy with much more frequency and vehemence. Starting with his 1844 address “On the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies,” Emerson explicitly aligned himself with the reform societies and abolitionists whom he had earlier criticized (Emerson 2004, 91–119). This alignment continued for the next decade and a half in Emerson's speeches and writings in response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the trial of Anthony Burns, the Kansas–Nebraska Act, John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, and the Emancipation Proclamation (Gougeon 2010; Levine and Malachuk 2011, 10–5; von Frank 1998). The younger Emerson, who was quick to censure his abolitionist peers' methods, seemed to give way to a new Emerson who joined them in their approach.

This more comprehensive account of Emerson's activism has spurred a reassessment of his thought. In contrast to those who had characterized Emerson as a detached critic, recent scholars have placed Emerson's political advocacy at the center of their analyses of his writings. Most of these scholars emphasize the

consistency between the philosophical underpinnings of his earlier writings and his later abolitionist work.¹⁸ As scholars from Garvey (2001) to Wirzbicki (2021) argue, Emerson's transcendentalism was not “otherworldly”; it entailed and encouraged political action. Moreover, these scholars have shown that the concepts of freedom, self-reliance, sincerity, individuality, complicity, democracy, and individual conscience that Emerson developed earlier in his career continued to permeate his antislavery writings and speeches (Dolan 2009; Garvey 2006, 161–98; Malachuk 2016, 136–88; Turner 2012, 15–46; Urbas 2020, 227–68; Woodward-Burns 2021; Zakaras 2009, 41–121). Others have gone even further by rejecting the dualistic pre- versus post-1844 narrative about Emerson's activism altogether (Levine and Malachuk 2011). Regardless of the particulars of their respective arguments, however, their central message is the same: Emerson's activism was consistent and continuous with his social-critical work.

On my reading, Emerson's life and writings present a number of challenges to this new consensus. First, Emerson's self-reflections on his political advocacy during the 1840s and 1850s do not express the sense of harmony between action and principle that we might expect from recent Emerson scholarship. For example, in a letter to the British social critic Thomas Carlyle during this period, Emerson wrote that his foray into antislavery advocacy felt like “an intrusion...into another sphere & so much a loss of virtue in my own” (Emerson and Carlyle 1964, 373). This sentiment is repeated several times in his *Journal*: in late 1844, he asserted, “I do not and can not forsake my vocation for abolitionism” (Emerson 1982, 9:64), and in 1852, he reiterated this declaration (Emerson 1982, 13:80). Notably, these statements were written soon after Emerson engaged in actions that scholars have treated as evidence of wholesale commitment to abolitionism. If we take these expressions seriously, however, they suggest not only that Emerson was ambivalent about his political advocacy but also that he continued to make a strong distinction between abolitionism and his “vocation.”

Moreover, Emerson's contemporaries' commentary about Emerson indicates that they observed a significant difference between his activism and social criticism as well. Prior to Emerson's delivery of his 1844 Address, well-known figures in the New England abolition movement believed he was entirely detached from their efforts. For example, the editor of the *Herald of Freedom*, Nathaniel Rogers, observed that the younger Emerson “remain[ed] in known *unconnection* with us” (Gougeon 2001, 176), and the abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman remarked that Emerson was “a philosophical speculator rather than a reformer” (Gougeon 2001, 174). However, Emerson's 1844 Address was so different in style, content, and tone from his other work

¹⁸ One exception to this trend is Read (2011), who argues that the tension between Emerson's commitments to self-reliance and abolitionism was agonizing for him throughout the Antebellum period.

that many abolitionists saw Emerson in a new light.¹⁹ Margaret Fuller and Brook Farm resident George Curtis both commented on the unusual degree of passion and vigor in Emerson's delivery—so unlike the “cold, clear, intellectual character that chills so many people” in Emerson's other lectures (Gougeon 2001, 179). Rogers remarked that the speech demonstrated Emerson's willingness to finally join “openly and expressly in the anti-slavery movement” (Gougeon 2001, 179). For his abolitionist peers, then, Emerson's antislavery advocacy represented a significant shift in his approach.

Finally, Emerson made several other decisions that highlighted the division between his activism and social criticism. In July 1844, when Emerson's publisher asked him to add material to the manuscript of his *Essays, Second Series*, Emerson could have opted to include his 1844 antislavery address, the essay he was working on at the time. However, Emerson instead decided to use a speech he had delivered earlier that year—“New England Reformers,” which is critical of political advocacy—suggesting that he wished to keep his social criticism and philosophy separate from his political advocacy (Gougeon 2001, 182–4).²⁰ Similarly, when Emerson's friends encouraged him to press his poetic genius in the service of abolitionism, his rejoinder, the poem “On Freedom” (Emerson 1853), spoke less to the importance of abolishing slavery than to a writer's place in this struggle—or lack thereof (235).²¹ Finally, after the Civil War, while many of Emerson's abolitionist peers were engaged in projects of radical reform, Emerson largely reverted to the style of writing and lecturing that he had engaged in prior to the mid-1840s (Gougeon 2010, 331). Although Emerson did not reflect on this decision, it seems that he returned to his “post” when he deemed it morally permissible to do so.

For all of these reasons, then, I do not see Emerson's direct political advocacy in the 1840s and 1850s as a continuation or culmination of his earlier social-critical work. On my reading, Emerson never believed that his social criticism and his activism could be reconciled.²²

¹⁹ Emerson devoted the address to a single, specific cause; used impassioned rhetoric to galvanize his audience into action; and presented an uncompromising stance on the immorality of slavery at the beginning of the address—all notable departures from the approach he developed in his earlier essays and lectures (Emerson 2004, 91–119).

²⁰ Although I draw from Gougeon's research, I disagree with his interpretation of this decision—namely, that Emerson included “New England Reformers” in *Essays, Second Series* to close the chapter of his life in which he was a non-activist critic—for the reasons enumerated above.

²¹ “On Freedom” seems to convey that poetry cannot play the role that his fellow abolitionists wanted it to. For further analysis of this poem, see Egan (2014).

²² Although I disagree with recent Emerson scholarship that maintains that his criticism and activism were continuous, neither do I agree with the work that this recent scholarship argues against. Earlier Emerson scholars contended that there was a tension between abolitionism and Emerson's social criticism on two grounds—first, that foundational Emersonian concepts, such as self-reliance and authenticity, were incompatible with collective

Instead, I see this new stage of Emerson's career as a tacit acknowledgment of the limitations of his style of social criticism. When Emerson became convinced that urgent action on behalf of abolition was necessary, he did not rework his social criticism; he rather set aside his criticism to join his peers in their pursuit of reform.

RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRITICS AND ACTIVISTS

Emerson's insight about the tension between activism and non-activist social criticism extends beyond his Antebellum context. While contemporary activism is not identical to the activism of Emerson's peers,²³ both critics and activists continue to experience the tension Emerson described in their pursuit of social change. For some social critics, this tension is manifest in their resistance to calls to participate in social movements.²⁴ For some activists, it is apparent in their overall perceptions about non-activists (Kutlaca, Zomeran, and Epstude 2020) and their struggle to reach the same audiences as non-activists can (Blee and McDowell 2012; Earl 2019). Perhaps more familiarly, it is also reflected in the conflicting demands many people face as scholars, on the one hand, and political advocates, on the other (Croteau 2005).

However, we must move beyond Emerson's perspective on this tension in order to realize its full potential. Early in his career, Emerson portrayed non-activist criticism as superior to activism—a mistake that he

action (Kateb [1995] 2002; Poirier 1985), and second, that Emerson's work starkly contrasted with that of radical reformers of his time (Anderson 1971; Bercovitch 1993). In my view, recent Emerson scholarship has posed significant challenges to both of these views. However, my argument regarding the relationship between Emerson's criticism and his activism is based on separate grounds—namely, on Emerson's understanding of the distinct roles of activists and critics, particularly regarding the relationships each can establish with their audiences.

²³ One notable difference between the activists Emerson wrote about and contemporary activists centers on the difference between movement “verticalism” and “horizontalism.” The activist groups Emerson critiqued tended to be structured in a “vertical” or hierarchical way, whereas most contemporary left-wing activists reject this form of organization on the grounds that it is undemocratic. Still, this difference has not made Emerson's observations about the reformers of his time obsolete. Horizontal activist groups—sometimes referred to as “leaderless” or “leaderful” groups—often struggle to be fully egalitarian and inclusive in practice (Freeman 2013). Further, groups that do commit to fully egalitarian decision-making procedures often do so at the expense of the cogency and effectiveness of the movement (Smucker and Taylor 2021). These struggles suggest that the positions of activists and non-activist critics continue to differ in ways that Emerson identified, despite apparent changes over the past 175 years.

²⁴ See, for example, the critic Ta-Nehisi Coates' response to Cornel West's call for Coates to show up for and vocally support the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. In 2015, West condemned Coates for his “cowardly silence on the marvelous new militancy in Ferguson, Baltimore, New York, Oakland, Cleveland, and other places” (West 2015). Coates, however, refused to join or speak out about the protests, saying that he “necessarily needs a little bit of distance” from peers' political activism (De León 2017).

never explicitly corrected. Further, later in his career, when Emerson tacitly revised his views about activism, he presented his experience of this tension as a personal torment. However, depicting the relationship between activism and non-activist criticism in this manner obscures the ways in which this tension can be productive for democratic societies.²⁵ Namely, when activists and non-activist critics take advantage of the differences between their roles, their respective work can be complementary, rather than either antagonistic or redundant. As I have argued above, one area of complementarity involves the distinct audiences that tend to be attracted to each set of actors. Activists are best-positioned to influence those who believe that social change is necessary and that, generally speaking, collective action is an effective way to pursue that change.²⁶ By contrast, non-activist critics are better-positioned to reach those who are unlikely to be moved by calls to direct action—either because they benefit from the status quo, such as Emerson’s white Northern audiences, or because they are ambivalent about activism for other reasons, such as those who are disillusioned, apathetic, or fearful of public reaction.²⁷ In addition, activists and non-activist critics often have access to different venues of communication, which influences not only who engages with their work but also the form in which it is conveyed. Activists often communicate their messages to audiences in real time, while non-activist critics often publish their work in the form of books or long-form essays. These different venues and modes of communication each create distinct possibilities. For example, activists who speak to others in in-person settings can foster a sense of solidarity that is helpful for energizing people to a specific cause, whereas non-activists who communicate from a distance can cultivate a sense of separation between audiences and their day-to-day affairs. When both sets of actors tailor their work according to the opportunities presented by their different roles, the scope of criticism—both activist and non-activist—enlarges to include a wider range of audiences and strategies for promoting reform.

A second reason why acknowledging the tension between activism and non-activist criticism can be productive is that each practice can help secure the necessary conditions for the other. On one end, non-activist criticism can create more auspicious social foundations

for future activism. During most periods, a majority of the public does not engage in mass demonstrations or other forms of direct action, nor are they involved in organizing work oriented toward challenging the status quo. However, the stance that this non-activist majority takes toward activists shapes the environment in which such activists operate. For example, those who sent pizza to those who occupied Zuccotti Park in 2011 extended the duration of the #OccupyWallStreet protests (Smucker and Taylor 2021). Conversely, business owners who donated to the New York City Police Department during the same period emboldened the police to raid the park (Smucker and Taylor 2021). Likewise, people who have retirement savings can choose to divest them from the fossil fuel industry (or not), creating material incentives to respond to environmental activists’ demands—or not (Connaker and Madsbjerg 2019). These people are not engaging in activist work by taking these actions, nor are these actions likely to trigger significant social change on their own. However, these actions foster environments that are either more hostile or more friendly to reform, which has an impact on activists’ work. By influencing non-activist parts of the public, therefore, non-activist critics can help support activism. In addition, non-activist criticism may encourage those who are currently not open to activists’ work to eventually become activists themselves, much as Emerson ultimately engaged in antislavery advocacy despite his earlier opposition to doing so.

Likewise, activism can help ensure the necessary foundation for future social criticism. As Deva Woodly and George Shulman have argued, activism is necessary to realize and sustain a well-functioning, truly egalitarian democracy (Shulman 2008b, 709; Woodly 2021). Non-activist critics rely on key features of well-functioning democracies, such as the freedom to lecture and publish their writings and the presence of audiences who can exercise control over their lives. For Emerson in particular, democracy was the political regime that allowed his work to be possible (Kateb [1995] 2002, 6; Shklar 2011). Arguably, this fact finally convinced Emerson that he had to “desert his post” as a critic in favor of direct activism: the more he learned about slavery, the more he realized that it contradicted the conditions of possibility of his entire social-critical project (Garvey 2001, 14–34). Overall, then, if social critics and activists perform different roles, they have more potential to establish a symbiotic relationship.

By contrast, the failure to conceive of social criticism and activism as distinct can have adverse consequences. When critics and activists themselves fail to do so, they are liable to be overconfident in their ability to accomplish many aims at once. As the trajectory of Emerson’s career suggests, this overconfidence generally leads critics to be ineffective on matters of great social importance or delay changing course when a new approach is urgently demanded. Likewise, activists can waste their limited resources in reaching out to audiences who are unequipped to engage with or opposed to their message. While these failures can result from other issues,

²⁵ Even if the decision of whether to pursue non-activist criticism or activist work is fraught within a single individual, it is not necessarily difficult to achieve a balance on a broader social level. Different people tend to be drawn to one or the other distinct role based on their inclinations, social status, and the specific pressures and demands they face.

²⁶ Such audiences may include, for example, those who are in a position of “motivated ignorance,” but who, when confronted with the reality of social injustice, are moved to take a more active part in resisting that injustice (Hayward 2020), or those who lack the community, networks, or self-confidence to advocate for themselves (Lorde 1984).

²⁷ Although this latter group includes many privileged people, it is important to note that it extends across racial, class, and gender lines.

including faulty empirical data, they are compounded when critics and activists do not recognize that, even when they are at their most influential, the scope of their respective influence is still limited.

Second, a failure to recognize the utility of social critics' and activists' differences tends to breed a counterproductive antagonism between the two kinds of dissidents. On the one hand, if activists believe that they can achieve the same ends as critics can, they are liable to conceive of some critics' distance from organizing and demonstrating as a moral failing rather than as a logical feature of their separate, but equally valid, role. On the other hand, if critics believe that their work is the functional equivalent of activism, they are more likely to see activists' rhetoric as unnecessarily dogmatic—as Emerson once did—rather than as vital to the task of mobilizing support. When this antagonism becomes pervasive, people who occupy the more stigmatized role are likely to experience significant pressure to take on work that they may not be well-suited to perform. In the short run, it may be helpful for more energy to be directed toward one role, as it was when Emerson joined his peers in their antislavery activism. In the long run, however, it may affect people's willingness to play the unfavored role altogether. As I have argued, social criticism and activism complement one another; thus, a significant imbalance would be detrimental to both activism and social criticism, as well as to democratic societies as a whole.

Finally, this counterproductive antagonism can extend to broader public discourse about activism and criticism. This is perhaps best illustrated by the example of prison abolitionism. Abolitionists have often been criticized on the grounds that their aim and slogan, “abolish the police,” is unpopular with the broader American public (Saletan 2020). If we better grasped the distinct roles of activists and critics, however, we might be able to see how this criticism misses the mark. At present, abolitionists' primary audience is not the general American public, but rather people who are already motivated to challenge the carceral state. As abolitionists know, slogans that galvanize other dissidents are not the same messages that appeal to those who are not (yet) radicalized in the same way. Rather than insisting that it is the responsibility of activists to do all things and speak to all audiences, we should appreciate that both activists and non-activist critics benefit from engaging in the work—and speaking to the audiences—that they are well-situated for.

Overall, my reconsideration of the relationship between social criticism and activism suggests that, despite apparent overlaps, we should pay more heed to what makes these activities distinct. When activists and critics do so, they help facilitate the work that their respective positions make more available to them. In addition, they help avoid antagonism that would undermine their potential to play mutually supportive roles. More broadly, as the problems facing contemporary democracies are vast and complex, we would do well to encourage a pluralism of roles such that

reformers can address these problems in distinct and complementary ways.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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