

REVIEW: Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive

Clare Hemmings, Jennifer Miller

Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive
Clare Hemmings

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In *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive*, Clare Hemmings, professor of feminist theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science, suggests that studying anarchist Emma Goldman's work and life could radicalize the contemporary political imaginary as well as feminist political practice.

For Hemmings, turning to Goldman may inspire scholars and activists to refuse political certainty and embrace political ambivalence. Hemmings suggests that embracing ambivalence challenges acceptance of inherited truths, including the idea that we know how to create a just society. Even more, accepting that ambivalence is a productive intellectual and political position enables Hemmings to place Goldman in feminist and queer activist and scholarly genealogies "without wanting to clean her up first" (6).

Hemmings engages several Emma Goldman "archives," including: 1) Goldman's subjective archive, which includes her writing; 2) the critical archive, which includes scholarship about Goldman; 3) the theoretical archive of current assumptions about what counts as a feminist or queer project; and 4) the imaginative archive, which "represents the straining to hear the voices that have never been heard, the attachments that cannot be given meaning, and the utopian desire for another future grounded in a different past" (8). Hemmings brings these archives into conversations to explore several interrelated topics throughout her book.

Chapter 1, "Women and Revolution," offers an analysis of Goldman's thoughts about women, feminism, marriage, and birth control. For Goldman, marriage as well as reproduction were barriers to women's freedom, and she [End Page 192] suggested a transformation in values was necessary to imagine and desire a more just society not constrained by convention.

Chapter 2, "Race and Internationalism," concurs with contemporary critiques of Goldman's failure to theorize race and class independently. Hemmings suggests that Goldman did not linger on

race because she saw it as an “arbitrary yoke” (95). In addition, Goldman envisioned a postracial humanism that based solidarity not on race, nation, or family, but instead on shared humanity (105).

Chapter 3, “Sexual Politics and Sexual Freedom,” explores Goldman’s scholarship and activism around women’s reproductive agency. She connects biological reproduction to the reproduction of capitalism and militarism. In many ways an extension of Chapter 1, Chapter 3 continues a discussion about the need to transform values. Here, Hemmings considers sex and love as sites for solidarity constrained by heterosexual kinship (127).

Chapter 4, “A Longing for Letters,” imagines Goldman’s responses to intimate letters written to her by union organizer Almeda Sperry. The letters write an imagined sexual history into the Goldman archive and complicate her alleged homophobia.

The conclusion, “From Passion to Panache,” is a celebration of the energy Goldman brought to her intellectual and activist work. Goldman moved beyond critique, daring to imagine and courageously attempting to live a life based on her vision of justice, one in which oppressive social relations were upended even if the consequences could not be foreseen and even if oppressive attachments could not be entirely abandoned.

Claire Hemmings’s writing style is both playful and exact. It demonstrates a clear fondness for Emma Goldman, that Hemmings’s addresses in the book. It is an enjoyable and provocative text that emphasizes the importance of affect and imagination while not abandoning the need for material activism.

I do have several criticisms. First, Hemming’s does a brilliant job describing and analyzing Goldman’s ambiguous gender, sexual, and racial politics. Her relationship to anarchism is less pronounced. I would have liked to see Goldman’s thoughts about government and capitalism engaged to the same degree as her work about gender and sexuality.

Second, Hemmings discusses ways contemporary feminists apprehend Goldman, but she does not paint a thorough picture of contemporary feminist and queer politics, even though it is these politics she wants “troubled” by engaging Goldman. **[End Page 193]**

Third, although Hemmings makes it clear that she does not seek to resolve contradictions in Goldman’s thoughts and actions about race, Goldman’s versions of humanism and communitarianism are at odds with the work of several queer of color theorists including Madison Moore and Joshua Chambers-Letson whose work is informed by José Esteban Muñoz, a queer theorist who explored the transformative power of art and the importance of taking account of difference for community work. Of course, this criticism relates to my previous one, but it is important to note the feminist and queer genealogies Hemmings places Goldman in are not themselves present in her book.

This is a challenging but rewarding text sure to generate significant classroom discussions. It can be effectively introduced in a variety of upper-level undergraduate as well as graduate philosophy, theory, and gender studies courses. **[End Page 194]**

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