

# Book Review: Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and The Imaginative Archive by Clare Hemmings

*In Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive, Clare Hemmings offers a rich, complex and searching new engagement with Goldman's life and politics, focusing on ambivalence as a key theme through which to understand her significance to contemporary feminist thought. While the book's rigorous immersion in debates around race, gender and sexuality may be daunting for some readers, this impressive and challenging work uses Goldman to hold a mirror up to feminism today and in the process teaches us a great deal about both, writes Ruth Kinna.*

If you are interested in this book, you can read a recent LSE RB interview with author Clare Hemmings [here](#).

**Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive.** Clare Hemmings. Duke University Press. 2018.

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Ambivalence and panache are the two central themes of Clare Hemmings's rich and complex new study, *Considering Emma Goldman*. Ambivalence runs through Hemmings's feminism, informs her methodology and her political judgments. Panache is a mode of politics which she sees as exemplified by Emma Goldman's life. It is a way of being in the world, battling against its orthodoxy and social norms. Above all, panache describes Goldman's tenacity and resilience. By considering Goldman, Hemmings shines a light on a life lived with panache to urge continuing, unbound and imperfect engagement with the dilemmas that feminists too often struggle to resolve.

In some way, this is less a book about Goldman than an account of Hemmings's ongoing, affectionate and searching dialogue with her. Of course, Goldman is the powerful presence in the book – Hemmings's 'guide'. But this is not a new biography or another attempt to locate Goldman in the history of anarchist, socialist or feminist ideas – at least not in any conventional manner. Nor does it try to provide a new reading of Goldman's political theory. And it's not really a book about anarchism, either – though this also has a place in the conversation. Instead, Hemmings develops new perspectives on Goldman's life and her politics by thinking through her contribution to feminism and anarchism. The result is a challenging reflection on contemporary feminism by a leading feminist who is by turns inspired, enthralled and frustrated by her subject. It is telling that Hemmings alerts readers that the analysis is likely to test those unfamiliar with Goldman's life, activism and writings, and that she does not include a similar health warning about the rigours of her coverage of contemporary feminism.

Hemmings demands a lot of her readers. Her interests extend across a broad theoretical terrain and embrace a multitude of authors. The debates she weaves into the text and the political tensions she unpacks across the book's six chapters are impressive, but can be daunting. Yet the writing is always inclusive, never for display. And she assists her readers by using Goldman to explore the book's central themes – gender, race and sexuality. By placing Goldman under the microscope, she also holds a mirror up to feminism and in the process teaches us a great deal about both.

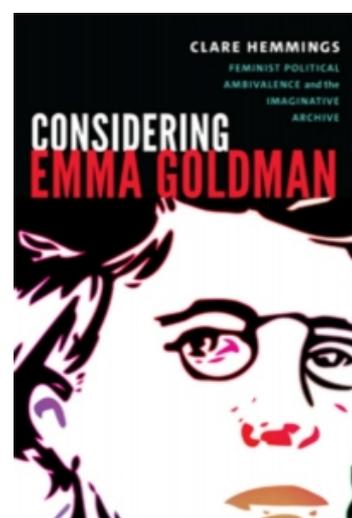




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Gender, race and sexuality are explored in four central chapters of the book: 'Women and Revolution'; 'Race and Internationalism'; 'Sexual Politics and Sexual Freedom'; and 'A Longing for Letters'. Hemmings uses four 'archives' to drive her analysis. Goldman's person and activities, her published and unpublished work, make up the subjective archive. The reception of Goldman's life and work constitutes the critical archive. The body of literature that shapes current feminist debates forms the theoretical archive. The fourth, the imaginative archive, emerges from the other three and is less closely intertwined with them.

The subjective, critical and theoretical archives are deployed to examine contestations of the meaning of gender, race and sexuality to highlight the tensions latent in the historicising of Goldman's politics and to reflect on the possibilities and limits of contemporary queer and feminist theory. In the fourth chapter, 'A Longing for Letters', the book shifts gear. Conjuring the imaginative archive into being, Hemmings presents an account of Goldman's fervent, fraught correspondence with Almeda Sperry, a less-than-happily married Pittsburgh activist and sex worker who turned to anarchism when she embraced Goldman. Only Sperry's letters to Goldman survive, but spying the gap in the historical record, Hemmings literally makes up the loss. Sperry's infatuation with Goldman dominates their exchanges and provides Hemmings with an opportunity to explore the relationship between desire, love and sex.

Two different conceptions emerge from the imagined exchange sparked by Sperry's discussion of prostitution (178-82). Sperry compares prostitution to marriage, following Goldman's published views, but whereas Goldman argued that paid sex work was more honest than conventional marriage, Sperry is 'appalled' by both. Elaborating through the correspondence, Hemmings has Goldman ask whether Sperry has any 'romantic' feelings for her clients, writing for Goldman that she falls 'in love with every man I lust for'. Sperry explains her disgust by admitting her complete indifference to her clients: sex work involves lust but only on the client's side. For Sperry, it is passionless and loveless. Accordingly, Sperry distinguishes the mechanics of sex – 'ejaculation' – both from her worshipful love of Goldman and the comfort she derives from her husband's company: he might be a brute but his nightly presence tempers her loneliness.

Sperry's observation that habit is even stronger than love is left hanging. Hemmings's response for Goldman is to reject Sperry's understanding of love as worshipful on the grounds that worship inhibits lovers from telling each other hard truths and she chides Sperry for degrading herself by attempting to calculate the number of intimates she has had. Sperry appears then to leave Goldman's critique of slavishness unanswered. Her counter is that the totting up is irrelevant to her self-abasement because love is about mutuality. For her, even one loveless encounter is appalling.

Sperry and Goldman seem here to talk past each other, but the upshot is that Goldman weighs love and desire against ownership and possession, while Sperry finds that desire can be expressed in ownership and possession, albeit in qualitatively different ways, and that love also has a possessive aspect. Although Goldman eventually resolves her differences with Sperry by severing contact, in Hemmings's account the tension between these two conceptions of love and desire remains open. Indeed, Hemmings's reminder that Goldman assumed Sperry's dependent role in her relationship with Ben Reitman (whom Sperry regarded a lout) serves to underline the ambivalence of the struggle between sexual repression and sexual freedom and Goldman's panache in dealing with it.

By accessing her imaginative archive, Hemmings adds another layer to her understanding of ambivalence. The ambivalence she draws out of the first three archives comes from a cerebral distrust of, and resistance to, certainty and the neat oppositions that it creates. The ambivalence revealed by her imaginative reading of Goldman is experiential, because it is about a willingness to brazen out disappointment, embrace failure and face down the displeasure that creative, revolutionary action entails. Hemmings calls it prefigurative and anarchist because it pays attention to voices that have been silent or silenced and to illicit or prohibited attachments. Yet, it is not straightforwardly so, because the creation of the future-now depends on a conscious meddling with the past and speaking-for. Hemmings is transparent about her 'utopian desire for another future grounded in a different past' (8), and this distinguishes her reconstruction of Goldman's letters from the fantasy of, say, Benjamin Wilkomirski. However, Hemmings's authorship of the Goldman correspondence risks blending post-truth ambiguity with utopian desire and it sits awkwardly with the anti-representational thrust of Goldman's political philosophy.

Hemmings's labelling of the imaginative archive brings into sharp focus her exploitation of a fifth, unnamed anarchist archive. Hemmings opens it in order to explore Goldman's commitment to self-emancipation and disregard for sisterhood, to present an a-feminist critique of feminism, highlight the enduring power of Goldman's analysis of reproduction, nationalism, patriotism and militarism, explore her conception of racial solidarity and endorse her advocacy of universal human liberation. Without theorising it as such, Hemmings acknowledges the aristocratic, Nietzschean aspects of Goldman's anarchism and the near-impossible demands that she placed on women to secure their own liberation. For me, this archive is less well-stocked than the others. Hemmings represents anarchism's history as a history of failure but overlooks the panache of the movement and the ambivalence of the markers of success and failure that anarchists deploy. The idea of transnationalism that she uses to back Goldman's universalism and communitarianism overlooks anarchist anti-state and anti-nationalist constructions of the nation and the alternative conceptions of the trans-national that come from it. While her discussion of slavery, a unifying thread in late- nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anarchism, allows Hemmings to recover an analysis of racism from Goldman's anarchism, she does not really investigate the anarchist critique of class that informs it.

In her conclusion, Hemmings argues persuasively that Goldman's ambivalence is fruitful. Goldman's struggles spotlight our continuing dilemmas and political problems and suggest how we might deal with them. She 'wants to fuel our imagination not to act in accordance with the parts of her [Goldman's] philosophy that we can isolate as infallible but to generate our own ways of intervening and living' (235). I agree. But Goldman also needed certainties to live her life with panache. Shortly before he died, she told Alexander Berkman (a neglected figure in Hemmings's account) that while lovers had come and gone, he was rooted in her being and ingrained in every fibre of her life. Knowing that someone is there to catch you when you stumble may also be a part of revolution.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*