

Clare Hemmings

Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press (ISBN: 9780822370031)

Reviewed by Penny Weiss, 2018

Penny Weiss is a professor of women's and gender studies at Saint Louis University. She is the author of numerous works, including *Conversations with Feminism: Political Theory and Practice* and *Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers*. She has also edited or co-edited a number of books, including *Feminist Interpretations of Emma Goldman* and, most recently, *Feminist Manifestos: A Global Documentary Reader*.

"Feminists across several generations have been seduced by Emma Goldman" (37), and Clare Hemmings is the latest thinker to fall under Goldman's considerable spell. The book contains two framings. The first is on what Hemmings calls the contending Goldman archives, which she names subjective (Goldman's writing), critical ("What we want to bring forward from Goldman's oeuvre or time and what we want to leave behind" [7]), theoretical (contemporary queer feminist ideas), and imaginative (thinking about "the future one wants to bring about in the present" [8]). The second overarching theme is the "profound ambivalence" or "uncertainty that characterises feminist and queer understandings of gender, race, and sexuality in the present [that] is easily obscured" (5), uncertainty that Hemmings believes we can constructively access through Goldman. Goldman, then, is less subject, though she is also that, than she is guide or companion on a journey in which her presence is always felt.

Hemmings is drawn to Goldman because "the Goldman archive is overflowing with ambivalence about gender and sexuality" (11). She believes that Goldman's ambivalences about such things as femininity and race and sexuality still exist today, but are masked. Hemmings thinks ambivalence bears gifts, whether those be complexity of engagement with ideas or challenges to limiting assumptions (17). Here are the grounds on which to hold the author accountable: "my interest here is in the consequences of taking Goldman's sexual ambivalence seriously as politically and historiographically significant for queer feminist studies today" (17). Further, "I want the reader to *feel* something: something that sparks an expanded sense of political thinking, perhaps, or a connection to past rebellion that lives in the imaginative present" (18). I think she mostly succeeds, but the journey through this text is not an easy one.

Chapter 1 is concerned with a long-standing debate about Goldman's feminism. Hemmings states, "it is not persuasive to claim [Goldman] as a feminist foremother without first thinking more fully about several aspects of her ambivalence about women and the nature of their oppression and freedom" (38). Interestingly, Hemmings finds that Goldman's "fundamental contributions to feminist history . . . depend on her *critiques* of feminism" (39), a rather novel position that both avoids casting Goldman as a feminist heroine (a popular tendency that clearly grates on Hemmings), and yet makes Goldman integral to the feminist project. Her ambivalence about women supposedly comes through in her stinging critiques of the feminine, which seem to target women rather than social structures; in her condemnation of feminists for settling for a

quantifiable equality compatible with the status quo (54, 60) rather than going for something more difficult, more radical, and more transformative (63); and in her criticism of those who fail to understand how women's reproductive role reproduces capitalism and militarism. Goldman both disparages and champions women (48). The problem is that "it is *their* lack of freedom that secures capitalism and militarism," but woman accepts "the pernicious respectability that keeps her chained" (48). Hemmings concludes that it is Goldman's "ambivalence about women," especially regarding their acceptance of their condition and their hypocrisy, that "is also the source of her political commitment to their emancipation" (49). We know both what women need to do and what prevents them from doing it (53). Hemmings concludes, "the question of Goldman's feminism is less about whether she is or is not, can or cannot be so named, but one that might prompt a reevaluation of how we perceive or imagine feminism in the first place" (71). I appreciate that. Hemmings treats Goldman like those who hesitate over a feminist identity today, as engaged in a complex and not easily resolved negotiation (75) that we should perhaps respect more. I find that a little less compelling. Too, in the end, I am not so convinced that Goldman is ambivalent--rather than having a subtle account of women's subordination and emancipation--or that feminists today miss her critique of elements of particular feminisms. After all, Hemmings herself thinks commentators like Kathy Ferguson and Candace Falk got most things right, as she relies heavily on their scholarship. Yet Hemmings gets well at key aspects of Goldman's work on women--at what aggravates her so--such as how women desire what diminishes them, and how respectability domesticates them. Such insights sit uncomfortably next to Goldman's commitment to women's freedom, on which so much else relies. But, is this "ambivalence" or nuanced political analysis and activism?

The next chapter is "Race and Internationalism." "If Goldman remains conflicted about gender and sexual politics, then this is even more the case with respect to her engagement with race and racism" (80), Hemmings declares. The chapter interprets "race and racism" broadly, apparently because Goldman does, so that the majority of it is about such things as cosmopolitanism and internationalism (indeed, a paragraph outlining the chapter [82] would cause most readers to ask whether the chapter is really about race, since the topics forecasted range from masculinity to family limitation to marriage, though slavery and lynching are among them). The archives conflict in this instance in that the critical archive seems either to excoriate Goldman's "lack of attention to race" (80) or to claim her as a predecessor to intersectionality (81). Hemmings tries to rescue Goldman from her critics, finding in the subjective archive at least enough to inform contemporary racial politics in unfamiliar ways. The method is the same as in the previous chapter: look at Goldman's ambivalences, show where her critics fall somewhat short in grappling with them, and take Goldman's "lessons" into the present and even the future. The language is not always easily accessible: "I hope attention to Goldman's thinking about race and internationalism might contribute to my broader project here on the problems of subject/object relations in historical knowledge production, and the importance of struggle over historical and contemporary political meanings" (86). To the extent that contributing to the broader project was the goal, the chapter fell short, but there are important insights in it nonetheless.

Using a draft, unpublished lecture for evidence, Hemmings argues that Goldman's "eugenic unpleasantness" ambivalently coexists with an understanding of race politics "that emphasises the emergence of free individuals in a resolutely antinationalist vision of kinship. . . . 'Race' for Goldman has value only when it is conceived of as the 'Human Race'" (95). This is a stunning

shift in scale (96) that both inspires and leaves racial politics untouched and untapped. Hemmings turns next to "metaphorical slavery and racist violence," where she argues against seeing Goldman as intersectional (103), and again chastises critics for turning away from the unpleasantness in Goldman that are the source of her insights. Goldman's sins are large: she stereotypes, depoliticizes, is inattentive, ahistorical, myopic, and naïve (98-99). Is all this "ambivalence," I ask again, or, in this case, simply evidence of shortcomings? Hemmings does not like the way other critics rescue Goldman as intersectional (101-05), but she engages in a similar enterprise of "exploring some interesting ways in which Goldman herself attempts to theorise the relationship between these oppressions in more depth" (106). It is really up to Hemmings to do such theorizing, rather than Goldman, however, as the former explores how "productive threads . . . in Goldman's thinking about race and internationalism *might be* brought to the fore" (108, my emphasis). Finally, Hemmings turns to "race, representation, and kinship" to explore those "productive threads." This is an admittedly speculative section, full of "mights" and "maybes." Hemmings explores how Goldman was represented in the press, which is fascinating, because it links to the issue of representation that Goldman "likely" had in mind as key to racism, as well (108): "there may be shared *methods* through which both experiences are fetishised and minimised" (109). Her point is that we should "understand the work that taking up race, or . . . gender does to other categories of experience and analysis in the maintenance of authority" (115). Then she discusses Goldman's marriage, which she "generously" reads (109) or even "overreads" (122) as "part of, rather than only opposed to, her understanding of sexual freedom as part of international solidarity" (119). In what I think is clearly a stretch, Goldman's strategic marriage to James Colton becomes part of her imaginative vision of kinship beyond race and nation that began the chapter.

Chapter 3, "Sexual Politics and Sexual Freedom," shows Hemmings at her best as a writer, but also gets bogged down in an overly long treatment of the secondary literature. She shines in her exploration of Goldman's views of sexual nature, homosexuality, and sexual freedom. Hemmings tackles these topics with the same approach as in earlier chapters, focusing on what is problematic to readers and showing those uncomfortable moments to be, in fact, the source of richness and insight, even if the conflicts and sources of dismay (146) are not ultimately resolvable (130). In this chapter and the next, Hemmings works with the imaginative archive, and is "drawn into a conversation that I observe, take sides in, and even fabricate" (132). And when she does this, it is clear that this woman can write! The flow is good, the text is at its most accessible, and the reader is drawn in. I'm not positive that the mostly imagined interchange of letters between Goldman and Almeda Sperry is worth nearly fifty pages, but it is great fun, and Hemmings's intimate knowledge of Goldman absolutely comes through. The interchange is meant to "be read *with rather than against* Goldman's ambivalent support of homosexuals as part of the sexual history that we inherit" (165).

Hemmings concludes her "generous reading of Goldman" (222) with an overall characterization of Goldman as antiauthoritarian, unsurprising for an anarchist. She then offers an interesting comparison of her with the character Cyrano de Bergerac, since both live with "panache." She concludes, "my tale is of a twentieth-century heroine who has captured the imagination of repeated generations of feminist and queer theorists, and whose life and writings exemplify the importance of sexual freedom as a window onto a better world. Mine is not a relationship of

identification with Goldman, it is a relationship of wonder" (231). That is, according to Hemmings, what Goldman wanted--to inspire (234).

There are some strengths of the book that do not come through in a chapter-by-chapter rendition. For example, Hemmings is an extremely astute reader and user of both the subjective and the critical archive on Goldman. She is as well-versed in the literature as one could possibly hope. She is a passionate and determined author. Too, she is convincing that we should turn to rather than away from uncomfortable passages in those whose work we study, as these are potentially among the more fruitful, revealing moments. As a scholar trained in exegetical analysis, I appreciate that Hemmings believes that "contradictions . . . [in an author] require our critical and political attention" (152), but I think that such an approach is not all that novel; nonetheless, Hemmings is capable of wresting new results from the process. I have some quibbles with the book. *Considering Emma Goldman* has a fair amount of jargon that readers must contend with, and a multiplicity of theories and methodologies are deployed that Hemmings usually assumes readers are already familiar with. Organizational problems are evident by the sheer number of times the reader encounters phrases such as "as I have already discussed" or "as we have seen," though I suppose one could argue this shows an integrated book rather than a repetitive one. I wished for more intricate readings of Goldman's texts, such as that offered of *The White Slave Traffic*, for Hemmings knocks it out of the park when she has such focus. But her project, as I mentioned above, takes Goldman as a guide rather than as a strict subject, so that Hemmings's focus takes us in other directions.