sexual freedom and the promise of revolution: Emma Goldman’s passion

Clare Hemmings

abstract

This article explores the contributions to a history of sexuality, capitalism and revolution made when we consider the work of anarchist thinker and activist Emma Goldman (1869–1940). I suggest that Goldman's centring of sexual freedom at the heart of revolutionary vision and practice is part of a long tradition of sexual politics, one which struggles to make sense of how productive and reproductive labour came together, and to identify the difference between sexual freedom and capitalist opportunity. Goldman's concern with the significance of kinship in holding together capitalism, militarism and religion, as well as sexual feeling’s capacity to disrupt those relationships, echoes across more than a century to resonate with Marxist, feminist and queer scholars' engagements with similar issues. But where contemporary scholars often tend to retain the opposition between culture and society, representation and the real, making it difficult to produce a materialist analysis of sexuality as transformative rather than always already overdetermined, Goldman's energetic insistence on sexual connectivity as freeing provides an important vantage point. Not only does Goldman consistently situate sexuality in a broad political context of the sexual division of labour, the institutions of marriage and the church, consumerism, patriotism and productive (as well as reproductive) labour, she frames sexual freedom as both the basis of new relationships between men and women, and as a model for a new political future.

keywords

Emma Goldman; revolution; capitalism; sexual division of labour; sexual freedom
During the course of research I develop very personal, intimate relations with my subjects. They grow and change and are generally full of surprises. I dream about the people I write about—they enter my conversations, intrude on the privacy of my bath, join me in the ocean and the garden. They tell me stories, give me feedback, disagree, suggest new sources. I listen very carefully. Frequently a great flirtation emerges. (Cook, 1984: 398)

My own ‘great flirtation’ over the past several years has been with Emma Goldman, anarchist activist and political theorist of the early twentieth century (1869–1940). In the Emma Goldman Papers Project archive and in the overlit microfilm room of UC Berkeley Library which was my partial home for six months, I fell for Goldman’s unruly commitments to anarchism, and was seduced by her insistence that women’s experiences and sexual freedom must be incorporated into the heart of any sustainable revolution.1 In this sense, my ongoing desire for Goldman feels strangely reasonable, as well as obsessive, responding as it does to Goldman’s own strong desire for new intimacies and a new social order. In this paper, I suggest that Goldman’s centring of sexual freedom at the heart of revolutionary vision and practice is part of a long tradition of sexual politics, one that struggles to make sense of how productive and reproductive labour come together, and to identify the difference between sexual freedom and capitalist opportunity. Goldman’s concern with the significance of kinship in holding together capitalism, militarism and religion, as well as sexual feeling’s capacity to disrupt those relationships, echoes across more than a century to resonate with Marxist, feminist and queer scholars’ engagements with similar issues. But where contemporary scholars often tend to retain the opposition between culture and society, representation and the real, making it difficult to produce a materialist analysis of sexuality as transformative rather than always already overdetermined, Goldman’s energetic insistence on sexual connectivity as freeing provides an important vantage point. Not only does Goldman consistently situate sexuality in a broad political context of the sexual division of labour, the institutions of marriage and the church, consumerism, patriotism and productive (as well as reproductive) labour, she frames sexual freedom as both the basis of new relationships between men and women and as a model for a new political future.

In what follows, I map out the terrain of Marxist, feminist and queer approaches to sexuality and revolution as they have been consolidated in the thirty years since D’Emilio’s now classic article ‘Capitalism and gay identity’ (1983). My concern here is not with providing a history of sexuality and revolution since Goldman, so much as it is with intervening in a recent historiography of sexuality’s involvement with capitalism that continues to imagine that relationship as separate even as it tries to figure them as intertwined. Indeed, when I say ‘separate’ here, I also mean uneven: when sexuality and capitalism are brought together, it is sexual relationships that tend to be conceived of as just as materially embedded as more properly productive ones; relations of production are much less often framed as culturally

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1 Thanks to Candace Falk at the Emma Goldman Papers Project for discussing the early stages of this project and for pointing me in the right direction to explore gender and sexuality in the Goldman archive.
and sexually imagined. Reading Goldman’s attempts to engage sexuality as central to any analysis of capitalism provides us with a materialist account of sexuality that certainly makes plain its role in providing raw materials to bolster unequal division of labour, and as unequal labour in itself. But Goldman’s account of affective embodiment and her vision of human nature as essential to any methodology of ‘sexual revolution’ take us in other directions too. In particular, Goldman’s embrace of sexual freedom as both means and (one) end of her anarchist utopia interrupts the temporal features that govern this relationship of sexuality and capitalism, suggesting alternate ways of understanding and writing that history.

**part I: desiring capital**

As Hennessy (2000: 54) has argued, there is a long and ‘well-established convention of segregating the history of sexuality from the history of capitalism’. Theorists point to both Engels and Marx as inaugurating this history, which Hennessy continues, ‘is most often rendered opaque by appeals to the obviousness of their irrelevance to each other’ (ibid.). While Engels makes the case that the ‘sexual division of labor has a material base rooted in the mode of production’ (ibid.: 41), his own distaste for homosexuality leads him to affectively and intellectually concur with Marx that the serious business of both production and revolution lie in labour and not in sex (Parker, 1993: 5). Marxist feminists have long been concerned to return to the sexual division of labour, arguing for its significance in underwriting relations of production, highlighting the invisibility of women’s reproductive labour through a public/private divide, and examining women’s sexual oppression within patriarchy and capitalism, while for materialist feminists such as Wittig (1992 [1980]) and earlier radical feminists Millett (1970) and Firestone (1970) sexuality is both the site of women’s particular oppression and a unique arena of revolutionary possibility. Similarly, early gay liberation theorists, as well as theorists of consumption and repression, such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, saw free sexual expression outside of kinship as both pleasurable in its own right and as threatening to a capitalist system reliant on the reproductive base it continued to deny (D’Emilio, 1983: 10).

Such a narrative is reminiscent of Goldman’s insistence on sex as a kind of extra-capitalist excess, but is most familiar contemporarily in the ‘transformation of intimacy’ thesis of sociologists such as Giddens (1992). Yet as critics of this strand of thinking, and a range of feminist, gay and lesbian and queer theorists have pointed out, the increasing numbers of women in the workforce and the growing strength of sexual identity politics in Western contexts in the last fifty years appear to have done little to challenge the voracious spread of capitalism over the same period (Duggan, 2003). Indeed, it is the conservative individualism associated with identity politics and ‘the cultural turn’ that sociologists of sexuality, such as
Seidman (1993: 137), target as both preventing a more radical sexual politics and weakening a progressive Left agenda more broadly. Ironically enough, we might say that we have come full circle. As Rofel points out, the Left has always been 'suspicious of attention to desire and pleasure' (2012: 185) and, in now being able to point to homosexuality as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, can return us to material relations of production with a clear conscience.

Seidman’s plea that scholars of sexuality move away from the ‘preoccupation with self and representations characteristic of identity politics’ (1993: 137) and towards analyses that consider sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, as historically and contemporarily intertwined with capitalism and modes of production, is indeed shared. Scholars such as Morton (1993), in addition to Hennessy, take queer theory in particular to task for its failure to take on the relationship between capital and the material construction of desire. Instead of an analysis overly concerned with cultural resonance and literary nuance, theorists are urged to consider ways in which ‘the desire produced in the market … [is] intricately linked to the formation and negotiation of sexual subjectivity’ (Curtis, 2004: 95). D’Emilio is frequently cited in such work, and with good reason, as he insists that

the expansion of capital and the spread of wage labor have effected a profound transformation in the structure and functions of the nuclear family, the ideology of family life, and the meaning of heterosexual relations. It is these changes in the family that are most directly linked to the appearance of a collective gay life. (1983: 102)

The increased entry of women into the labour force allows them to be folded more fully into new capitalist formations and generates the possibility of new desiring subjects. And indeed, at the time, activists such as Goldman celebrated the challenge to the public/private divide that progressive capitalism offered women, even as they lamented its horrors. For Mattaei, it is the new spaces opened up by gendered segregation of waged labour that allow women to encounter and thus desire each other outside of the home (1995: 15–16), while for Hennessy the shift to waged work creates possibilities for leisure that fostered new consumer markets. Yet there is a paradox at the heart of this set of shifts that D’Emilio is careful to emphasise, and that Goldman also warned us about in her critique of marriage, as I explore below; namely, that while no longer a site of production the family takes on ‘new significance as an affective unit, an institution that produce[s] not goods but emotional satisfaction and happiness’ (1983: 103). The heterosexual family then becomes a site of compensation, a place where gendered and sexual identities can be invested in when waged work fails to deliver on its promises, as Berlant has most notably argued in her work on contemporary neo-liberal intimacy (2011). For Hennessy, as for Goldman, this reification of ‘the family’ obscures the uneven gendered division of labour within it (2000: 63) and forces emotional adherence to relationships that are inauthentic.
I want to return us to a consideration of the opposition between representation and labour, culture and materiality that has operated for as long as sexuality has been bound up with capitalism. Duggan’s work on ‘homonormativity’ is instructive: Duggan compellingly charts the co-optation of gendered and sexual identities in neo-liberalism as part of how the latter consolidates its claims to democracy, even while it expands the global reach of the unequal divisions of labour essential to capitalism (2003). In this sense, Duggan’s argument closely resembles those discussed above, since she situates sexual identity at the heart of the market and as a central driver of the fantasy of Western progress, and draws out the work this championing of sexual and gendered equality does to obscure the exploitation and violence at the heart of contemporary capitalism’s expansionist project. Yet for Duggan, contemporary critics also contribute to the instantiation of a culture/production opposition, seeming to accept the terms of the debate within which production objectively describes the site of labour (including the exploitative extraction of its surplus), as though gender and sexuality were simply secondary effects. We are drawn back to Goldman again, it seems, who icily points out that it is frequently those who hold sexuality and labour apart who are most likely to benefit from their co-constitution (1906, 1909). Contemporary scholars who accept this separation, Duggan suggests, do little to demystify the role gender and sexuality perform within global capitalism. Indeed, we contribute to their reification in our repetition of culture’s lack of seriousness, and frame identity (particularly homosexual identity) as carrying a disproportionate burden of both consumerism and unequal global power relations. We thus risk obscuring the very dynamics that we hope to reveal and challenge. Duggan joins Rofel in her challenge to those who privilege production over culture in their accounts of desire, since this retains a pecking order—material relations of production allow for the emergence of new forms of desire—that limits both what desire might mean (Rofel, 2010: 428) and how we read capitalism itself: as variegated rather than as a ‘universal, uniform totality’ (Rofel, 2012: 187).

Across accounts that seek to think capitalism and sexuality together, the hope for alternative signification of desire is always marked as a future potential outside of the utopian or dystopian narratives that dominate. For the most part, our political hopes of thinking differently about the history and present of ‘desire in capitalism’ require— unsurprisingly enough—moving away from identity-based solutions, either through abandoning the fantasy of ‘culture’ as political and returning to the real business of production, or through a focus on that which cannot be ‘caught’ by capital, usually—and a little predictably—affect. Thus, Hennessy suggests affect over identity as a way of developing ‘collective agency’ (2000: 106) in the search for what she terms, borrowing from Ann Ferguson, ‘revolutionary love’ (220); Puar thinks through Deleuze’s concept of assemblage as an alternative to the oppositional axioms of identity that lend themselves so fatally to co-optation (2007: 204), while Eng
proposes that we examine ‘affects and desires that are intangible and evanescent’ (2010: 472) as an alternative to the desires and identities so loved by global capitalism.

It is not that I think these are bad suggestions in themselves. Indeed, if identity is the favoured mode of capitalism's vicious alibis, it makes perfect sense not to continue to invest in it, and such a position would certainly chime with Goldman's emphasis on ‘passion’ as a significant revolutionary methodology. But to imagine affect as the free and freeing alternative has another effect: it accepts the story that capitalism and the Left like to tell of the relationship between capital and sexuality, even as it proposes ways and means of moving on. Yet that story is a set-up, a circular narrative in which shifting relations of production always inaugurate what we think of as modern gender and sexual subjectivities, leaving us with no choice but to abandon the overdetermination of identity and move on. It is a story that has also been challenged, however, and in my view rather persuasively. Floyd reminds us, for example, that it would be more productive to think of queer and Marxist epistemologies as comparable rather than hierarchically ordered, as part of the challenge to a view of sexuality as ‘merely cultural’ at a theoretical and political level (2009). Freccero goes further, inverting the authoring capacities of feminist and Marxist epistemologies to insist ‘that commodity exchange in Marx takes its form from the exchange of women’ rather than the other way around (2012: 53). Freccero’s insistence is not only a question of ‘which came first’, but also a challenge to the subject–object relationship that grounds a singular—progressive or dystopian—vision of history. Freccero’s interest in exploring the multiple ways in which ‘queer desires … animate the scene of capital’ (ibid.: 54) reorders the authorial relations of what we imagine that relationship to look like; I return us to ways of queering that scene through my readings of desire in the Goldman archive below. In asking us to think again about both the historical emergence and contemporary iterations of desire, Freccero invites us to engage what Berlant might call the intimate life of capitalism (2011), not as a way out of capital’s designs on gender and sexuality, but as a way of reimagining their relationship altogether.

part II: desiring revolution

We can tell the story of Emma Goldman’s contribution to the history of sexuality's significance for capitalism in a range of overlapping ways. As highlighted above, Goldman pays considerable attention to how essential reproductive labour and marriage are to capitalism, and complains about the lack of seriousness with which anarchists and socialists treat gendered and sexual oppression. And in analyses that would satisfy writers such as D’Emilio and Hennessy, she both tracks the impact of these arrangements for the formation of gendered and sexual...
subjectivities and challenges her contemporaries to situate reproductive imperatives within much broader contexts of militarism, religion and social transformation. As I detail more fully below, Goldman folds gendered and sexual transformation into her account of revolution, focusing on the importance of support for the oppressed and the development of non-capitalist passions as part of her vision of a better world. Goldman is able to conceptualise the embodied and immediate as fundamentally linked to the abstract and social demands of revolution due to her position as an anarchist. She shares the beliefs of her mentor, Peter Kropotkin, and her long-time friend, Alexander Berkman, that revolution will be brought about through labour interventions (strikes, education of the masses), but also through individual and collective practices in everyday life that can inaugurate a different set of values, and from which the vision of a better world might arise. For anarchists, to believe in revolution is to believe in the transformative capacities of human nature, currently prevented from flourishing. Over time, however, Goldman becomes more firmly convinced that revolutionary commitment is incomplete without attention to the interplay between individual and collective needs. Where Goldman differs from many of her comrades is in her emphasis on women’s emancipation as essential for fostering that revolutionary action. In ways that resonate with queer critiques of heteronormative time (e.g. Love, 2007; as well as Freccero, 2012), too, Goldman’s account of sexual and gendered revolution includes playing with temporality: bringing about new values in the present requires a creative imagination that enacts the future now, and brings forward lost voices. While refusing single issue gendered and sexual politics even as they are emerging, yet steadfastly sticking to her understanding of politics as bound up with a human nature we cannot yet know, Goldman suggests a different entry point into the history of sexual politics than those currently on offer. Neither a force for straightforward un-repression nor a site of simple co-optation, Goldman presents us with an important vision of sexuality as an ongoing site of revolutionary struggle.

For Goldman, women’s lot is an unhappy one, insofar as their sexuality is limited by moral and economic expectations of reproduction. She considers marriage a site of particular abuse: it causes only ‘sorrow, misery, humiliation … tears and curses … agony and suffering’ (1897: 2). In this she echoes her friend Agnes Smedley’s reflection that ‘[m]arriage acts on me like a nutmeg grater’ (1925), shaving away the best parts and leaving a bitter, brittle husk. For Goldman, marriage is the basis of private property and the particular oppression of women: it is the ‘private possession of one sex by the other’ (1897: 2), ‘an economic arrangement, an insurance pact’ (1911: 4), the effect of which is to strip women of their humanity. Marriage is the perversion of love for Goldman, reflecting a substitution of economic bargaining for real inter-subjective possibility. Within this institution, women are commodities to be exchanged and their only currency is sex and attractiveness. Marriage both produces and mirrors prostitution, since men will
seek sexual satisfaction before and during marriage, and since married women have also sold themselves, but for a different set of rewards.\(^4\)

Goldman is certainly not alone in her exploration of the horrors of feminine sexuality within marriage. Indeed, the engagement with and struggle over female sexuality among her radical contemporaries typifies the era, as Stansell (2000) and Ferguson (2011) both suggest. But where Goldman differs from other writers is in her emphasis on the extraordinary power the corruption of love in marriage has to shape women’s very being, as she takes on the affects required to represent this ideal: subservience and passivity. Thus, Goldman insists that entering into ‘marriage insurance condemns [woman] to life-long dependency, to parasitism, to complete uselessness, individual as well as social’ (1911: 4). While men are chased from home, are robbed, poisoned and stunted by marriage (ibid.: 11), for Goldman women have nowhere to go, are trapped in their dependency, parasitism and pettiness, and cling desperately to the scant rewards of corruption. Small wonder ‘woman’ is understood as the opposite of a ‘revolutionary subject’, both because of her particular form of privatised wage slavery and also because of her ontological formation in and through duplicity and passivity.\(^5\) In Goldman, womanhood and the inability to act, or act as an active human subject, go hand in hand.

Yet unlike many of her contemporaries, who see this feminine narcissism as one reason for sidelining attention to the private sphere, all the while benefiting from the sexual division of labour and the idealisation of the married couple form, Goldman locates the economy of women’s sexuality firmly within the means of production and the exploitation of surplus labour. Women are not only commodities themselves, but also producers of the next generation of exploitable labour, within the twin evils of capitalism and militarism. Not only is women’s experience of sex and love one of ignorant misery, her reproductive labour is bound as to what President Roosevelt saw as a national duty to provide offspring for the nation (Falk, 2005: 70). Some of Goldman’s most rousing analysis is produced as a critique of this abuse, as she appeals to her mostly working-class audiences, who have direct experience of bodily violence of labour, and know well which bodies are disposable in wartime. Her prose dripping with anger, Goldman writes:

> Capitalism … roars through its whistle and machine, ‘Send your children on to me, I will twist their bones; I will sap their blood, I will rob them of their bloom,’ for capitalism has an insatiable appetite. And through its destructive machinery, militarism, capitalism proclaims, ‘Send your sons on to me, I will drill and discipline them until all humanity has been ground out of them; until they become automatons ready to shoot and kill at the behest of their masters.’ Capitalism cannot do without militarism and since the masses of people furnish the material to be destroyed in the trenches and on the battlefield, capitalism must have a large race. (1916: 468)

From women’s drudgery and ill health in child bearing to the misery and pain of seeing one’s children destroyed by labour or war or both, for Goldman women are
uniquely situated not only in bodily terms within both capitalism and militarism, but also in terms of their role in reproducing capitulation to these economic and political strictures (1915). Goldman would certainly have no problem thinking of womanhood—public or private—as bound to progressive capitalism. Indeed, it is precisely because of their location at the border between public and private that Goldman considers women’s sexual emancipation all the more significant as part of a revolutionary vision.

Already we begin to see that Goldman’s work is significant for the ways in which it sees sexuality as a site of ongoing struggle for capitalism, rather than as part of a progressive or co-opted teleology, as suggested in Part I. If we attend to sexuality, then we can illuminate the combined workings of morality, militarism and exploitation (Goldman, 1913). But particularly important for any challenge to an understanding of the historical relationship between capitalism and sexuality is Goldman’s emphasis on sexuality as a productive site of revolutionary transformation, as well as co-optation. Against all the miserable evidence she herself provides, Goldman insists that sexuality can be freed from co-optation through its liberation from the strictures of marriage, reproductive necessity and mindless patriotism (1908). A lifelong advocate of birth control, Goldman wanted to interrupt the self-perpetuating misery she believed large families brought, particularly to the poor (1970a [1931]: 185–186). Performatively contrasting the ‘crime of bringing hapless children into the world only to be ground into dust by the wheel of capitalism and torn into shreds in trenches’ (1916: 470) with women’s own desire to ‘throw off the yoke of poverty and slavery’ (1911: 13), Goldman emphasises the rise of women’s anger and their ‘delight’ (1927–1930: 2) in raising children under more ideal conditions. Foregrounding the right to have or not have children was essential for Goldman, both in order to recognise women as fully human and in order to free mothers to pass on liberation rather than co-optation to the next generation (1897: 2). In this sense, Goldman begins to put together a revolutionary methodology that incorporates everyday moments of women’s refusal to conform to the straightjacket of womanhood, as much as it relishes women’s historical and contemporary participation in more established movements.6

As part of this muscular project of wresting sexual meaning from capitalism—a project central to fostering revolutionary conditions—Goldman develops a strong ethic of support for non-normative subjects and practices. She publicly defends both prostitutes and homosexuals, emphasising on the former’s demonised status and the latter’s creativity (Kensinger, 2007: 263–264), but she does not see these practices as an end in themselves, nor does she consider that they carry innate value. Indeed, while prostitution is no worse than marriage, neither is it free of corruption, and while homosexuality should not be condemned, neither should it be promoted as a self-evident good. The true revolutionary potential of sexual freedom lies in its methodological capacity to disrupt the unequal division of

6 See Porter’s excellent edited collection of Goldman’s writings on the Spanish Revolution, which include reflections on women’s heroism (1983).
labour at the heart of re/production, since once women withdraw their reproductive, commercial and affective labour, the cogs of capitalism, militarism and religious ideology will grind to a halt. Goldman’s goal in relation to support for individuals or groups is the development of sexual freedom, the liberation of women and men in order that they might experience real, open and honest relationships with one another. That openness is not valuable in its own right, but as part of a methodology for living revolution in the present in order to bring it about in the future. We should continue to expose the violence of a deadened and deadening sexuality as part of capitalism, but more importantly invest in intimacies that reorient affect in utopian ways.

Again, Goldman’s approach is performative. Her celebrations of liberated sex and love are animated and intense, as she proclaims that ‘the voice of love is calling’ (1906: 15), and declares love to be ‘the strongest and deepest element in all life, the harbinger of hope … defier of all laws … the freest, the most powerful molder of human destiny’ (1911: 12). At points Goldman’s language is semi-religious in its fervour, taking her audience with her as she insists: ‘Some day, some day men and women will rise, they will reach the mountain peak, they will meet big and strong and free, ready to receive, to partake, and to bask in the golden rays of love’ (ibid.: 15). Goldman frames sex itself as the most natural thing in the world, as simply ‘nature’s demand’ and a shared ‘intense craving’ that both men and women possess (ibid.: 7). Just as ‘the flowers abandon themselves to dew and light’, so a woman ‘can abandon herself to the man of her choice, in freedom, beauty, and ecstasy’ (1913: 6). Goldman advocated sex education for girls and believed that not being able to experience and express ‘the depth and glory of sex experience’ would ‘undermine [a woman’s] health and break her spirit’ (1911: 7).

It would be easy, I think, to read Goldman as offering up sexual freedom as an innocent but appealing revolutionary challenge to the capitalist consolidations she spent a lifetime resisting, as a simple precursor to the feminist or gay liberation ideal we are now easily able to put in context. And indeed she has been critiqued both for the relentless vagueness of her vision for change and for her privileging of an essential human nature at the heart of that vision. Thus, Molyneux (1986) and Stansell (2000) are both somewhat scathing of Goldman’s lack of attention to the details of domestic labour, what they see as her reliance on a fantasy of naturalised spontaneity rather than painstaking negotiation in transformations of intimate life. And Haaland (1993) castigates her for the sexual essentialism and heterosexism that Marso also accepts, but is more forgiving of (2003). Goldman’s proposition of revolutionary zeal as based in bodily sexual feeling, and as that which survives capitalist co-optation, most certainly emerges from what Day refers to as her ‘faith in the goodness of human nature’ (2007: 123), and there can be no question that she privileges opposite-sex ecstasy as the ground and apex of revolutionary experience. Yet in addition to my framing of Goldman’s interest in moments of alternative attachments as part of her concern with revolutionary
methodology rather than a more cumulative approach, there are important features of her sexual essentialism that relate to my earlier goal of challenging the temporal order of things.

For Goldman, the idea of an essential female nature is for the most part a capitalist lie that we would do well to challenge (Hutchison, 2001: 553). The fantasy that women are naturally passive, have a lower sex drive than men and are less intellectually acute is precisely what prevents women coming to consciousness, from Goldman’s perspective. Indeed, she fervently resists the idea that ‘virility’—a favourite attitude she advocates—is masculine in any way, or that this de-genders the women who take it on (Goldman, 1926). For Goldman, what is outrageous about the sexual arrangements she lives within is that they turn something potentially wonderful—and shared by men and women—into something fundamentally corrupt. The force that will overcome the sexual corruption upon which capitalism relies is generous, open and democratic; it takes your breath away and forges the world anew. The contours of this force are certainly underdrawn, but partly this is because they are as yet unknown. While Goldman privileges sexual nature as revolutionary, this is as much an outcome of political will as something that inaugurates it. I think this is why Goldman’s style is so resolutely performative: she wants to bring about the new intimacy she insists is already happening.7

Goldman’s stress on the importance of the political emergence of new ways of relating to others is a consistent thread in her work. So, for example, while Goldman celebrates motherhood as ‘the mother courage, the mother greatness, the maternal instinct’ (1927–1930: 3), often indicating that it is the woman’s highest state, she does not think this is simply a given. It is not universal—not all women have this instinct—and even for those who do, it can (and sometimes should) be resisted (Ferguson, 2011: 165). And Goldman also marks an important distinction between the desire to have children, and the necessity of raising them, arguing across her oeuvre that childrearing is a collective responsibility. Several lovers try to force her to have children, and leave her for other women to do just that; but while Goldman narrates her decision not to capitulate as a profound loss (both of them and of motherhood) she also narrates it as a political choice she stands by (1970a [1931]: 187). And in relation to the passion of her intimate relationships, what commentators have narrated as Goldman’s excessive attachment to her male lovers is nonetheless mediated by her equal fervency that the men she cannot resist embrace her worldview as well as her. In her letters to her lover and tour manager, Ben Reitman, Goldman moves from overwhelming lust to recognition of his political failures and manipulation; she frequently tries to end their relationship, yet is forever drawn back to him. She finds her hopes that Reitman would be a fellow political and intellectual, as well as sexual, traveller dashed, and comes to doubt her own belief that love could conquer political fallibility and weakness, could inaugurate rather than stultify a revolutionary politics.8 Yet in her autobiography written some fifteen years later, Goldman has a more ironic take on their dynamic,

7 See Kennedy (1999) and Falk (2002) for more detailed analyses of Goldman’s theatricality as central to her anarchist vision of a future lived now.

8 For examples of Goldman’s letters to Clare Hemmings.
centring her pain as the result of a contest between love and revolt. While she still laments love’s failure to reach its ideal, she is clear that politics must be animated by passion, but that passion cannot be revolutionary without politics (1970a [1931]: 415–436; 1970b [1931]: 519, 582, 643). As Ferguson notes: ‘[the] very traits that drove Goldman to hold onto deeply problematic personal relationships also compelled her revolutionary resolve: she loved her revolutions in the same extraordinary way she loved her partners’ (2011: 753).

A rather different, but related, ambivalence can be identified in Goldman’s relationship with Almeda Sperry, an American labour activist and sex worker who embraced Goldman’s politics and person. During 1912, and sporadically during 1913, Sperry wrote Goldman over sixty, often very long, hilarious, provocative, gorgeous, smutty, over-the-top, disturbing and brilliant letters that document her activist activity, her loneliness and critiques of small-town life, her money woes, her relationship difficulties with men and women, her unrepentant love of drink and her paranoia (Sperry, 1912–1913). But the interest in them has primarily been because of Sperry’s explicit desire for Goldman, her weaving together of fantasy and memory and her descriptions of desire for other women (see Cook, 1979; Katz, 1992). They also serve as a challenge to any simple view of Goldman’s desire as only male oriented. We do not have any of Goldman’s side of the correspondence, although it is clear from Sperry’s texts that Goldman wrote in turn, albeit more sporadically, and that the two of them spent time on holiday together in the late summer of 1912. Sperry’s letters become nostalgic for particular rather than generalised intimacy after their holiday, and she shares explicit memories of their time together across several months in the period straight after. It is also not entirely clear why the two stopped corresponding—or, of course, if they actually did—but Sperry’s increasing desperation to claim Goldman as her own, her muddled and violent fantasies and veiled threats of outing Goldman, followed by her abject letters asking for forgiveness and confessing her crimes against her give a clear sense of a relationship in decline.

The lack of sexual detail in the Goldman archive makes tracing the role of same-sex love in her propositions for sexual revolution rather difficult. In relation to male homosexuality, we have her supportive letters to prominent sexologists;9 we know she lectured on the topic but no copies of these texts remain. In relation to women’s same-sex desire, we have even less: brief mentions in her autobiography (1970a [1931]: 155–156; 1970b [1931]: 556); her references to lesbians as disappointed with men or ‘crazy’ in letters to Alexander Berkman (Goldman to Berkman in Haaland, 1993:170); and her rather too fervent ‘defence’ of Louise Michel following accusations of her lesbianism (1923). We might be able to read between the lines of fragmentary notes for her autobiography that parse her friendship with birth control advocate Margaret Sanger as allowing her to express her ‘previous theoretical interest in sex variation’, reflections that do not make it

9 Goldman wrote to Magnus Hirschfeld in 1923 (Goldman, 1991: reel 13) and 1932 (reel 27); to Edward Carpenter from 1924 and 1925 (reels 14 and 15); to Havelock Ellis from the same period (1991: reels 14 and 15); and in 1928 (reel 20) and 1937 (reels 39 and 40).
into the final version (Goldman, 1929). But as Arondekar (2009) emphasises, this lack of information is the norm for feminist and queer historians, such that the imagination of the archivist is as key as the 'missing facts' in constructing a meaningful sexual history, a factor overlooked both by those who accuse Goldman of 'hetero-essentialism' and those who seek a seamless history of sexuality, capitalism and revolution.

In the course of research at the Emma Goldman Papers Project, I recall a conversation with Falk about Goldman and homosexuality. Falk, who frenetically flitted back and forth between her editing of Goldman's papers in her office and checking on progress of researchers in the archival space, happened to mention in passing the curious fact that, despite her public support for homosexuality, no copies of Goldman's lectures on the topic had been recovered. This precipitated a conversation about the gap in the Goldman archive between what we know she did and said and what remains, a conversation that in turn prompted my decision not to try and uncover evidence of her same-sex desire (which I had hitherto expected to find). Instead, I reoriented my focus to track this gap itself as indicative of the search for sexuality in the archive, as unstable evidence of ambivalence that tells us something historical and personal at once. It is precisely this potent absence that, to return to this paper's epigraph, has found me 'listening carefully' to the stories Goldman might have spun in her letters back to Sperry. I have committed to their presence even in their absence as part of what allows me to centre sexuality in the archive, as unstable evidence of ambivalence that tells us something historical and personal at once. I flirt with how these letters must have sounded, how she would likely have been drawn on by Sperry's desire for her, but repulsed by her possessiveness; how she would no doubt have been genuinely too busy to see her, but how hollow this would have sounded to both of them; how curious about her own body when with Sperry, and how enraged when Sperry's violent rages threatened its integrity. How much fun they must have had, running to shelter from the rain during that September holiday! How free they both felt, but how they both stuttered over what it all meant once the pleasure had ebbed away. What kind of history of sexual freedom do I trace when I listen like this to the echoes of what cannot be verified?

**Conclusion**

Goldman rethinks the relationship between capitalism and sexuality in several ways that are instructive for how we represent that relationship. Writing at a time when transformations in waged labour and the visibility of modern female and homosexual subjects were simultaneously emergent, Goldman's forces us to consider an often-ignored third point: revolutionary fervour. The historiography of sexuality...
and capitalism I have traced tends to see the former as emerging from shifts in the latter, such that alternative histories remain perversely secondary to this primary transition. History is thereby reduced to the dominant discursive features we inherit, querying what we then do with that history but not the facts of its inauguration, while consideration of Goldman opens this history up as a messy set of contradictory relationships that remain contested and unresolved. In her insistence on women’s and homosexuals’ rights to sex outside of both reproduction and the family, Goldman highlights the significance of reproductive sex as a driver of modern capitalism in familiar ways. Yet, in her emphasis on sexual freedom as both means and end of revolutionary transformation, Goldman refutes conventional gendered and sexed understandings of human nature. Goldman insists on a minority view as having the potential to challenge the majority (1969 [1910]). She theorises women’s position in ways that resonate with contemporary standpoint epistemology, in that they are subjects of oppression but also producers of different and valuable knowledge about change. Importantly, women and men do in fact act contrary to the roles laid out for them already, and in claiming such minor moments as extraordinary Goldman begins to elucidate a revolutionary methodology that values quality over quantity, and that allows for a vision of utopia based on alternative values we can—and do—already experience.

Goldman’s anarchist vision of a revolution with women’s sexual emancipation at its heart refigures temporality for all of us. In her desire to situate nature as emerging from rather than simply inaugurating political struggle, Goldman turns our understanding of sexual freedom as an essentialising force on its head. Sexual passion, for Goldman, does not flow from gender or sex, but from a commitment to human nature as the endpoint rather than starting point of political struggle. Since real feeling does not inhere in the person per se, but is the basis of engagement with others, sexual passion is mobile and creative rather than static, separate or asocial. It does not demonstrate itself through identity, and in fact never simply did. And as I hope I have begun to show, a queer feminist historical perspective must also start from the imagination Goldman herself insists upon, if we are not simply to end up imposing our own uncertain realities onto the past we have designs on. Throughout her work, Goldman holds fast to the belief that sexual freedom may be a central part of a human nature we do not yet know the contours of. To follow her there, we may have to relinquish our belief that we know where we are now.

**author biography**

Clare Hemmings is Professor of Feminist Theory and has been teaching at LSE’s Gender Institute for fifteen years. Her research and teaching explores how ideas in both gender and sexuality studies travel. Her book *Why Stories Matter* was published by Duke University Press in 2011.
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doi:10.1057/fr.2013.29