

CLARE HEMMINGS

Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

A Genealogy of Ambivalence:

Emma Goldman, Postfeminists and Feminist Politics for Our Times

In an era of ‘postfeminism’, where gender equality is often presumed to have been achieved – in some places and not others, imposed or prescribed as a marker of modernity – it is easy for feminists to feel disheartened. In contemporary Europe, gender equality seems either to have been thoroughly mainstreamed to the point of de-politicisation, or to be sidelined by the always more urgent demands of a financial crisis. In such a moment, it is easy to write a history of feminism as left behind, co-opted, surpassed or abandoned, and to seek to reclaim a familiar feminism, one thoroughly known because one is its historical and contemporary subject. But what if feminism needs to move beyond itself to ask questions relevant to the political problem of gender today? What if we need to think not only about how gender (in)equality may have changed and how it might be differently addressed, but also challenge presumptions about its subject (and thus its history)?

To begin this work, I want to think two seemingly disparate political moments and subjects together. Emma Goldman, that larger than life transnational political actor who could not attach to feminism, but whose was consistently drawn back to sexual politics and the gendered character of structures and institutions (including social movements). And a contemporary post feminist subject, whose articulated distance from feminism remains undercut by the ‘but’ that returns her to the difficulties of gendered negotiations, and whose attachments may be elsewhere. In the process of thinking these two figures together I hope to argue that *cultures of gendering* have been under-estimated in the drive for formal gender or sexual equality. What remains under-theorised in our feminist desire for clear histories and attachments (as well as politics) is the ambivalence that also characterizes the present and past of feminism, an ambivalence that political conservatives have no problems identifying and exploiting.