



**Clio**

Women, Gender, History

**38 | 2013**

**Working Women, Working Men**

---

## Gerda Lerner (1920–2013). Pioneering Historian and Feminist

Linda Gordon, Linda K. Kerber and Alice Kessler-Harris

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/324>

DOI: 10.4000/cliowgh.324

ISSN: 2554-3822

**Publisher**

Belin

**Electronic reference**

Linda Gordon, Linda K. Kerber and Alice Kessler-Harris, « Gerda Lerner (1920–2013). Pioneering Historian and Feminist », *Clio* [Online], 38 | 2013, Online since 15 September 2014, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/324> ; DOI : 10.4000/cliowgh.324

---

## Appreciation

### **Gerda Lerner (1920–2013). Pioneering Historian and Feminist**

by Linda GORDON  
with the assistance of Linda K. KERBER  
and Alice KESSLER-HARRIS

Gerda Lerner was a historian of remarkable eloquence, insight, and courage, an advocate of the importance of history to the pursuit of social justice. She devoted her academic lifetime to showing that women had a history, and that knowing it could alter human consciousness. “Writing history and thinking about women,” she wrote in her collected essays, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (1998), “could lead to transformative politics rooted in both thought and experience.”(xv) She was the single most influential figure in the development of women’s and gender history since the 1960s. During her lifetime, a field that once encompassed a mere handful of brave and marginalized historians became one with thousands. The field expanded from Lerner’s development of an MA program at Sarah Lawrence College to the establishment of a PhD program at the University of Wisconsin/Madison to the presence of women’s-history faculty in the great majority of American colleges and universities.

All historians are in her debt. She was part of the intellectual movement once called “history from the bottom up,” a movement sparked by the African American civil-rights struggle that saw a vast transformation of the whole discipline. Social history of all kinds was

a low-status practice in the 1950s, and political history confined itself mainly to kings, presidents, courts, and congresses. Lerner's death on January 2, 2013, in Madison, Wisconsin, at age 92, makes this a moment not merely to honor and appreciate her but also to discuss the meaning of her life's work for all historians.

She was born Gerda Hedwig Kronstein to a wealthy, secular Jewish family in Vienna in 1920. Her family was typical of the Jewish bourgeoisie in central Europe but also unconventional, as their class status allowed. (Her autobiography, *Fireweed*, offers a vivid picture of her family and household.) Her father Robert, an ambitious young army officer, married a woman with a substantial dowry, which he used to establish a profitable pharmacy and pharmaceutical factory. That wife – Ilona, mother of Gerda and her younger sister Nora – soon came out as a bohemian who practiced sexual freedom, vegetarianism and yoga. These things scandalized Robert's mother who decided she had to “save” her granddaughters from their mother's influence. Since they lived in separate apartments in the same large house, the two women were often in unsuppressed conflict and the girls saw frequent fireworks between the two women. Ilona won one fight, naming Gerda's younger sister Nora, after Ibsen's play. But she was miserable, furious with her mother-in-law and bored with her husband. Ilona wanted a divorce but under Austrian law would have lost her children to her husband (who would of course have turned them over to his mother) if she had insisted. So instead she negotiated a legal contract: she and Robert would present the public appearance of a marriage necessary to bourgeois respectability but would lead separate lives; Ilona was granted several months vacation away from home each year, and she lived thereafter in a room marked off from the rest of the apartment. The girls were, of course, raised by a string of nannies and governesses. Ilona, meanwhile, bought a separate studio where she entertained boyfriends, while Robert kept a mistress in a separate apartment where he spent most of his evenings.

Thus Gerda both witnessed her mother's striking female independence and was forced into her own independence as a child often without a parent, and as an older sister. Meanwhile she partook in the entitlements and tastes that the Kronstein class position

allowed. She became a naughty girl, misbehaving both at home and at school, even flirting with Catholicism. At age ten she was enrolled in an elite *gymnasium* for girls, where she thrived on the academically demanding environment. As a teenager she moved from resenting and defying her mother toward seeing her as a victim of social restrictions. Meanwhile she was reading Tolstoy and Gorky and listening to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith.

From the 1920s Austrian Nazis, encouraged by their German brothers, had been attacking workingmen, Social Democrats and Communists with increasing violence. Anti-Jewish propaganda and discrimination intensified. In 1934 open, armed, civil warfare broke out, so close that Gerda could hear the machine gun fire from her home. Schoolmates organized her into participating marginally in left student activism – she read and passed on left newspapers and contributed to the “Red Aid” charity which helped the families of arrestees and exiles. In 1939 her worried father sent her to England to study English for the summer; hating her placement there, she managed to join a youth camp run by the eminent scientist and Communist J.B.S. Haldane, where she absorbed further Marxist ideas.

Many Jews began fleeing after Hitler’s seizure of Austria in March 1938, and her father joined them after being warned that he would be arrested. He had previously established a business in Lichtenstein, which enabled him later to bring his family there. The *sturmabteilung* (stormtroopers) arrived soon after he left, searching first for subversive books, and then with a warrant for his arrest. In his absence they arrested Gerda and her mother, seeking to use them as hostages to force her father to return. Ilona and Gerda were imprisoned for six weeks and released only after Robert agreed to sell his Austrian assets to Gentiles for a pittance. In prison the two were separated. (*Fireweed* details the horrors of the incarceration.) Gerda survived with the help of some Communist cellmates who shared their meager portion of food with her.

When Gerda arrived in the US in 1939, stateless and alone, she was a teenager shaped by several somewhat contrasting influences: her upper-class sense of confidence and entitlement; her mother’s assertion of female and sexual independence; and the terror of Nazism and imprisonment. These forces, ultimately, set her on her life’s path.

She managed to get in to the US through a former Viennese left-wing boyfriend who had immigrated earlier and then sponsored her as his fiancée. They married and promptly divorced, quite amicably. Moving into a circle of German-speaking anti-fascist refugees, she met Carl Lerner, a Communist theater director, fell in love, and married him in 1941. They moved to Los Angeles, where they joined the Hollywood left. Carl became a successful film editor, best known for his work on *Twelve Angry Men*, and Gerda began to write. First it was short stories, one of which was published in a left-wing California literary journal, *The Clipper*. She wrote a novel, *No Farewell* (1955), based on her Austrian experiences, and collaborated with Carl on some screenplays, notably *Black Like Me* (1964) which he then directed. She collaborated with her good friend Eve Merriam on a musical, *The Singing of Women*, produced off-Broadway in 1951. Their daughter Stephanie was born in 1946, Dan in 1947. She and Carl were both Communist Party members and she proved a persuasive organizer; soon she became a national leader in the CP-identified Congress of American Women, attached to the Soviet-dominated Women's International Democratic Federation. In the CP she met for the first time organized opposition to "male chauvinism," as it was called at the time, and to racism. She read the work of Marxist feminist Mary Inman and began to learn about America's deeply entrenched racism.

When Carl Lerner's career was destroyed by the Hollywood McCarthyist blacklists, they returned to New York with their two children. They left the CP. The McCarthyist persecutions were frightening to all those victimized and Gerda, unsurprisingly, would deny her Communist past for fully four decades. But she remained loyal to her friends and furious at the "friendly" witnesses who denounced others to the Un-American Activities committees. Carl found film-editing work through friends, and Gerda turned her organizing skills to women's groups, such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and she became an early member of the National Organization of Women-NOW (where she was far from the only ex-Communist).

At age 38 Gerda enrolled in college at the New School for Social Research where, despite her undergraduate status, she taught one of the first courses in US women's history in 1962, a point of which she

was always very proud. She then moved on to graduate school at Columbia University. Driven by her developing concern with race and women, and defying warnings and belittlement from those who argued for a more conventional and “high status” topic, Gerda wrote a PhD dissertation about the abolitionist Grimke sisters. (At the time, the only other historian working on the nineteenth-century women’s-rights movement was Eleanor Flexner, also, not incidentally, a Communist). With characteristic confidence, she took her dissertation to a high-status trade publisher, Houghton Mifflin, and it was in print only a year after earning a PhD. This was a smart as well as ambitious move, because at the time, academic presses would have been more scornful of women’s history. But her ability to get a trade publisher also reflected her fine writing style – an extraordinary achievement for a woman writing in her second language.

Carl became ill and a malignant brain tumor was found. After nursing him through an early and miserable death, Gerda wrote a powerful and painfully honest memoir, *A Death of One’s Own* (1978). It spoke of their relationship, of his right to know the full facts of his illness, of the violence and mystery of death. She never remarried. She connected her loss of Carl with the deaths of others in her extended family at the hands of the Nazis. Always thinking historically, she observed that “the past must be retraced in order to survive the present. The pieces must be joined together...out of the memories, the ashes of destruction, the suddenly revealed meanings.” That could be the epigraph for her autobiography, *Fireweed* (2002), perhaps the most beautifully written and moving of her many publications. But it too is a history: one that she researched meticulously, often finding that the documentary record proved her memory wrong (a lesson all historians should take in) and that required revisiting the horrors of Nazism and her childhood loneliness.<sup>1</sup>

In 1968 Lerner began teaching at Sarah Lawrence College where in 1972, in partnership with Renaissance historian Joan Kelly, she developed an MA program in women’s history, the first in the US.

---

<sup>1</sup> “In the Footsteps of the Cathars,” an essay published in *Why History Matters*, Lerner reflected on her shock in discovering remnants of internment camps in southern France (p. 20-22).

Twelve years later, in 1980, she won a professorship at the University of Wisconsin, over significant opposition, where she developed a PhD program in women's history. Advocating for women's history meant convincing a reluctant generation of historians to incorporate women's history into the profession. Her own history had prepared her for the task. Jews, she wrote, had deployed their history "as a primary tool for the survival of the people." (*Why History Matters: Life and Thought*, 1997, p. 207) Women's history had to do the same. It had already, she thought, "forced us to question not only why certain content was previously omitted, ignored, and trivialized, but also to consider who decides what is to be included." (*Why History Matters*, p. 131). A generation of incipient historians of women came to know her as an architect of the Coordinating Council on Women in the Historical Profession (CCWHP), which, beginning in 1969, persuaded the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians to join in improving the status of women. Because Lerner pushed herself, her colleagues, and her agenda hard, she was never a neutral figure. Loved and admired by a legion of devoted followers, she was not always welcomed by traditional historians who resisted her goals.

Two related intellectual and personal understandings marked Lerner's career: a visceral grasp of how power worked and a sense of the relatedness of various forms of inequality and oppression – class, race, gender, and global imperialism. This astute sense of power characterized both her scholarship and her advocacy. Always a canny organizer, in both her faculty positions she recognized that merely teaching women's history courses would not be enough to build respect for the field, and she strategized to build women's history programs with visibility and autonomy. At Wisconsin she had the *chutzpah* to set a condition on accepting the job offer – the university and department had to promise to hire a second faculty member in the field. (That position went to me, and I came to Madison in 1984. For 17 years I was Gerda's closest colleague). The visibility of these programs, for which Gerda was an indefatigable saleswoman, attracted top-notch students willing to take risks, pursuing graduate work not merely as job training but also out of a commitment to movements for social justice. At Wisconsin, for example, the

women's history program required outreach work by Ph.D. students. They organized regular women's history lectures aimed at a broad public and developed a project for bringing women's history into the public schools: producing several slide shows with scripts – this was well before the days of Powerpoint – at both high-school and elementary-school levels on women's work, women in sports, and women's activism which they then presented in public school classes. These projects contributed to the building of a tight community among graduate students, many of whom are leading historians today.

Meanwhile Gerda remained an active and influential scholar, although she probably would not have predicted what parts of her work would have the greatest impact and where that impact would be most felt. After the Grimke book, Lerner's teaching and scholarship never again focused on the relatively few elite or successful women who were already historically known. Her 1969 article, "The Lady and the Mill Girl," examined class differences among women in the Jacksonian US, probably the first such piece within the second wave of women's historians to do so.

It was her second book, the 1972 *Black Women in White America*, a collection of primary sources, that had the broadest impact at the time. African American history was a rapidly growing field by then, but neither books nor articles focused on black women were available. Doubters thought, as they had done about women in general, that a lack of sources doomed such projects to failure. So Lerner's book was a political act, an eye-opener, a treasure trove of sources, and a set of clues in the hunt for further sources. It *proved* that African American women's history could be written. A generation of black women historians felt empowered by that book.<sup>2</sup>

Lerner was already a feminist in the 1940s, but in the following decades her political and intellectual orientation grew and changed. Like many of her generation and political background, she was at first uneasy about some of the sexual issues raised by the women's

---

<sup>2</sup> NdT: This book is the only one to have been translated into French, as early as 1975: *De l'Esclavage à la ségrégation : les femmes noires dans l'Amérique des Blancs*. Textes choisis et présentés par Gerda Lerner ; traduit de l'anglais par Henriette Étienne et Hélène Francès, Paris, Denoël et Gonthier, 1975.



liberation movement; for example she, like Betty Friedan, worried lest the movement's provocative style and the coming-out of lesbians stigmatize the cause of women's equality and women's history in particular, an anxiety she shared into the early 1980s. That changed radically through her master research and writing project of the 1980s, published in the two volumes *Creation of Patriarchy* and *Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1986 and 1993). These volumes share something of the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxieme Sexe* – a commitment to understanding the relationship between women and men as a dynamic set of power relations that developed over time, that has psychological dimensions, and that can be changed.

Behind this book lay a new conviction that patriarchy was the first and ultimate source of all oppression. To do this massive study she left modern US history for anthropology, archeology, mythology and early modern Europe, and returned to reading widely in German as well as English-language scholarship. This global study of western civilization was part encyclopedism and part Germanic grand theory – returning to her Germanic education, she was using the nineteenth-century scholars of patriarchy, such as Bachofen, Marx and Engels, against themselves. Through this study she came to argue that control over women's sexuality and reproductive power was the root of all forms of domination, a radical-feminist rather than Marxist position. In volume one she cited evidence for pre-patriarchal societies in which women were co-equal or even superior to men, using arguments that resembled those made for "primitive matriarchy," and relied on the worship of female goddesses for support. Not surprisingly, the work was criticized sharply by ancient historians and anthropologists.

In volume two, which covered the middle ages and early-modern Europe, she had greater historical expertise to rely on and provided a sweeping indictment of the effects of patriarchy in suppressing women's possibilities. But as reviewer Lynn Hunt pointed out, in doing so she diminished the achievements that women had made during these centuries. Still, even in this work some of Lerner's modern historical understanding appeared. She refused to accept patriarchy as a biological given, but followed the Marxist tradition in considering the rise of agriculture as producing patriarchy; she clearly noted the varieties of patriarchy that arose in different socio-

economic milieu; she presented men's appropriation of women's labor as evidence that women's subordination is an economic, not just a cultural matter; and she always reminded the reader of class divisions among women.

In these two volumes she introduced the scaffolding for a claim that she had been making for some time in her frequent lectures: that depriving women of education and knowledge of their own history was the root of their subordination. Women's history, she would frequently tell audiences, is the key to women's freedom. This is of course a distinctly non-materialist claim, for it minimizes the importance of women's economic subordination and resultant dependence on men. Moreover, many historians would be reluctant to name a single factor as the root of domination. But in making this claim, Lerner the organizer was speaking. She was making the case for the necessity of her life's greatest work, women's history, and for it not to be pigeon-holed as a separate "field," left to specialists. She wanted a holistic history and she wanted a history that served to advance understanding of all forms of injustice. No one has put this better than Natalie Zemon Davis, who has commented on "her unflagging struggle for gender and racial equality, and her courageous effort to think big about patriarchal turns in human history. Her life was a model of triumph over persecution and loss, of continuing hope and connection. Her reach is long and stays with us – lingers like the memory of her laugh." These qualities earned her recognition as a celebrated historian who garnered dozens of honors, including the presidency of the Organization of American Historians, 17 honorary degrees, and the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art.

Hard-won understanding of the importance of the documentary record led her to preserve her own papers carefully, and to give them to the Schlesinger Library for the History of Women at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. A calendar of the first sections of the papers is available online, and more will be added as her remaining gift is processed. A German-language collection of papers from her family of origin is available on line at the Leo Baeck Institute Archives in New York City.

There was disappointment in her later years: indeed, she had misgivings about the turn to gender history which displaced, she

thought, the focus from women and from an activist collective subject; and about the continued neglect of women in historical scholarship about the largest questions of our past. Gerda's disappointments were as global as her ambition: growing inequality, religious fundamentalism, the rise of xenophobia and racism throughout the world, American military and security policy. But Gerda was by nature an enthusiast and any uptick in progressive social movements lifted her spirits. She crowed with delight about the "Arab spring" and Occupy. When the massive demonstrations in defense of labor unions erupted in Madison, Wisconsin, in the fall of 2011, she was ecstatic, and had her son Dan take her there, only regretting that she was too frail to be there everyday.