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Obituary

Gerda Lerner, 1920-2013

- Features - Sexual politics -

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Gerda Lerner has been the single most influential figure in the development of women's and gender history since the 1960s. Over the course of 50 years, a handful of brave and potentially marginal historians created a field with thousands of PhDs. The field expanded from Lerner's development of an MA program at Sarah Lawrence College in 1972 to the presence of Women's History faculty in the great majority of U.S. colleges and universities.

While most feminist historians understand our debt to Lerner, many other Leftists do not grasp her contributions as an activist and historian. Her death at age 92 on January 2, 2013, in Madison, Wisconsin, makes this a moment not merely to honor and appreciate her but also to discuss the meaning of her life's work.

She was born Gerda Hedwig Kronstein to a wealthy Jewish family in Vienna in 1920. Her family was typical of the Jewish bourgeoisie in central Europe but also most unconventional, in the way that their class status allowed. (Her autobiography, *Fireweed*, offers a vivid picture of her family and household.)

Her father Robert was an ambitious young army officer who married a woman with a substantial dowry, which he used to establish a profitable pharmacy and pharmaceutical factory. Her mother Ilona soon became a bohemian and an advocate of sexual freedom, vegetarianism and yoga, which "scandalized" Robert's mother who became determined to "save" her granddaughters from their mother's influence.

Since the two families lived in separate apartments in the same large house, the two women battled each other. (Ilona won one skirmish by naming Gerda's younger sister Nora, after Ibsen's play.)

Ilona was miserable, and it is hard to tell how much of her discontent was with her mother-in-law and how much with her husband. She wanted a divorce but would have lost her children if she had insisted. Instead she worked out a legal contract: they would continue the appearance of a marriage but would lead separate lives "as long as they were discreet," and she was granted several months vacation away from home each year.

She lived thereafter in a room "marked off" from the rest of the apartment. Gerda and Nora had to make appointments to see their mother — the girls were, of course, raised by a string of nannies and governesses. Ilona bought a separate studio where she entertained a succession of young boyfriends, while Robert kept a mistress in a separate apartment where he spent most of his evenings.

Escape from Fascism

I mention these familial arrangements to emphasize Lerner's early exposure to female independence along with the entitlements, tastes, and unconventionality that the Kronstein class position allowed. She became, she wrote, a naughty girl, misbehaving both at home and at school, even flirting with Catholicism. Luckily, she was enrolled in a fine girls' gymnasium (secondary school), where she thrived on the academically demanding environment.

In February 1934 violent class warfare broke out in Vienna, with Nazis and the Dollfuss government attacking Social Democrats and Communists, and Gerda could hear the machine-gun fire from her door. Meanwhile she was reading Tolstoy and Gorky, listening to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, and participating timidly in student activism —

she read and passed on left newspapers and contributed to the “Red Aid” charity that helped the families of arrestees and exiles.

In 1936, sent to England for the summer, she joined a youth camp run by the eminent scientist and Communist J.B.S. Haldane, where she absorbed Marxist ideas.

Following the Anschluss of March 1938 many Jews began fleeing and her father joined them clandestinely, after being warned that he would be imminently arrested. He had previously established a business in Lichtenstein, which enabled him later to bring his family there.

The Sturmabteilung (stormtroopers) arrived at their house soon after he left, searching, they said, for subversive books, and a month after that, they came with a warrant for his arrest. In his absence they arrested Gerda and her mother, seeking to use them to force Robert to return. They were held, separately, for six weeks and released only after Robert sold his Austrian assets to Gentiles for a pittance.

Gerda believed she survived only because some Communist cellmates shared their food with her. She also believed that her experiences as a Nazi resister and imprisoned teenager were the most formative influences of her life.

She arrived in the United States in 1939, a young radical traveling alone, and trained as an x-ray technician to support herself. She soon met Carl Lerner, a Communist theater director, fell in love, and in 1941 married him. They moved to Los Angeles, where he became a successful film editor. She began to write short stories, one of which was published in a left-wing California literary journal, *The Clipper*.

Immersed in the Hollywood Left, she defined herself as a writer on anti-fascist themes. In 1943 she became a citizen, but not without telling off an INS official who pointed out that she had previously been listed as an enemy alien. (Those who knew her will recognize her prickly and often unnecessary set-tos with service workers. Her instinct to fight was her strength, and her difficulty.)

She collaborated with Carl on screenplays, including “Black Like Me” (1964), which he then directed. Their daughter Stephanie was born in 1945, son Dan in 1947.

Gerda soon became a national leader in the Congress of American Women, which was attached to the CP-identified Women’s International Democratic Federation, and was influenced by Communist theorists of male chauvinism, such as Mary Inman. With the CAW she worked with poor Black women and began to understand the limitations of her own middle-class assumptions.

McCarthyism hit the Lerner’s hard. When Carl Lerner’s career was destroyed by the Hollywood blacklists, they returned to New York with their two children. Carl found film-editing work through friends, and Gerda remained active in community struggles, but they left the CP.

Toward Feminist Scholarship

As with many American progressives, the frightening McCarthyist persecutions left a residue of caution. For Gerda, however, cautiousness did not come easily. Although during the next few decades she hid her Communist past, she remained loyal to her friends and furious at the “friendly” witnesses who denounced others to the HUAC committees,

and she continued her activism.

She increasingly turned her attention to women's groups, such as the Parent Teachers Association, and the lessons of Mary Inman took her, 20 years later, into the National Organization for Women. (Many younger feminists of the women's liberation movement that emerged several years later thought of the NOW women as liberal, rather than leftist, but this was off the mark: NOW included more Blacks, more union women, and more leftists than we then knew.)

At age 38 Gerda enrolled in college and then graduate school. 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 19th-century women's-rights movement was Eleanor Flexner, also, not coincidentally, a Communist. This affiliation flowed directly from the fact that in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the only political group in the United States to raise concerns about sex discrimination "other than the tiny National Woman's Party" was the CP.

Lerner's dissertation was published by Houghton Mifflin, only a year after earning a PhD. That achievement reflected her fine writing style "in her second language. Becoming an historian never weakened Lerner's identity as a writer. In 1955 she published a novel focused on Vienna just before the German occupation, *No Farewell*. She collaborated with her good friend Eve Merriam on a musical, "The Singing of Women," produced off-Broadway in 1951.

After nursing Carl through an early and miserable death from a brain tumor, she 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.

The autobiography of her early years, *Fireweed* (2002), reads like a novel. But it is also 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.

In 1968 she began teaching at Sarah Lawrence College where in 1972, in partnership with Joan Kelly, she developed an MA program in women's history, the first in the United States. Twelve years later she won a professorship at the University of Wisconsin, over significant opposition, where she developed a PhD program in women's history.

Grasping Power and Oppression

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 underlay both her scholarship and her advocacy. 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 took the job only on the condition that the history department hire a second faculty member in the field, and I came there in 1984. (It was my privilege to be Gerda's partner in this program for 17 years, a very close partnership with some friction, much gratification, many long hikes in which she tired me out, and a great deal of fun.)

The visibility of these programs 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 PhD students – for example, the students produced several slide shows, which they showed at elementary and high schools, on women's work, women in sports, and women's activism.

After the Grimke book, Lerner's teaching and scholarship never again focused on the relatively few elite or successful women who became historically well known. Her 1969 article, "The Lady and the Mill Girl," examined class differences among U.S. women in the Jacksonian era, probably the first such piece within the second wave of women's historians to do so.

It was her second book, however, 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.

Arguing the Roots of Patriarchy

Lerner was already a feminist by 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 emphases and tactics of the women's liberation movement. But that movement opened her thinking, as was visible in her master project of the 1980s, published in the two volumes *Creation of Patriarchy* and *Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1986 and 1993).

To do this massive study she left modern U.S. history for anthropology, archeology, mythology and early modern Europe, and read widely in German as well as English-language scholarship. This global study of western civilization was part encyclopedism and part Germanic grand theory – using 19th-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. But throughout the two volumes the two theoretical strands argue with each other.

She refuses to accept patriarchy as a biological given, but following the Marxist tradition understands the rise of agriculture as producing patriarchy, albeit a patriarchy varying in different socio-economic milieus; she sees men's appropriation of women's labor as evidence that women's subordination is an economic, not just a cultural matter; and she reminds the reader of class divisions among women.

Yet at other times she relies on evidence of female gods as proof of a pre-patriarchal order, and makes a most non-materialist claim that depriving women of education and knowledge of their own history was the root of their subordination.

That last claim, however, was Lerner the activist speaking. She is 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 a history that served to advance understanding of all forms of injustice.

There was disappointment in her later years, 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 in her wheelchair, only regretting that she was too frail to be there every day.

Gerda Lerner won awards too numerous to mention, including Austria's highest, the Cross of Honor for Science and Art, in 1996. She is survived by her sister, Nora Kronstein Rosen, an acclaimed artist, of Tel Aviv; her son Dan Lerner, film director, producer and cinematographer, of Los Angeles; her daughter Stephanie Lerner-Lapidus, a psychotherapist, of Durham, North Carolina; and four grandchildren.

Contributions to honor Gerda Lerner's legacy and to further the field of women's history can be made to the Lerner-Scott prize of the Organization of American Historians (of which Gerda was president) for the best women's history dissertation at <https://www.oahsecure.org/donate> or by mail at <http://www.oah.org/donate/pdf/2012o...>

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