



The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy

Gerda Lerner

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A pioneer in women's studies and long-term activist for women's issues, and a past president of the Organization of American Historians, Gerda Lerner is one of the founders and foremost scholars of Women's History. *The Creation of Patriarchy*, the first book in her two-volume *Women and History Series* (1986) received wide review attention and much acclaim, winning the prestigious Joan Kelly Prize of the American Historical Association for the best work on Women's History that year. Ms. hailed the book for providing "a grand historical framework that was impossible even to imagine before the enlightenment about women's place in the world provided by her earlier work and that of other feminist scholars." *New Directions for Women* said it "may well be the most important work in feminist theory to appear in our generation." *Patriarchy* traced the development of the ideas, symbols, and metaphors by which men institutionalized their domination of women. Now, in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, the eagerly awaited concluding volume of the *Women and History Series*, Lerner documents the twelve-hundred-year struggle of women to free their minds from patriarchal thought, to create Women's History, and to achieve a feminist consciousness. Lerner argues that the millennia-old educational disadvantaging of women and their marginalization in the intellectual life of Western civilization retarded women's ability to comprehend their condition and to define their needs as a group. She shows the devastating impact on women's psychology of notions of their innate mental inferiority, reinforced generation after generation by the teachings of family, church, and state. Through examining over a thousand years of feminist biblical criticism, Lerner illustrates her most important insight - the discontinuity of Women's History. The generation to generation transmission of knowledge on which the building of civilization rests did not work for women. Because they did not know its histo

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Willa says

Brilliant! Must-read! Gives so much perspective of where we came from, and how deeply we are still rooted in the old patriarchy, yet what the pathways for growth have always been.

Eleanor Cowan says

Back in the day, even though brilliant academic women had much to say, they were required to say it in within the confines of the stiff academic fashion of the time. So even though I am learning a lot, it is hard work to sift through the crouched, guarded patriarchal formalities with the language.

Still, gems are everywhere and I consider this book well worth the effort. I assign myself 4-5 pages a day and am always well-rewarded.

I have learned so much about the oppression of women and the courageous crawl out.

Eleanor Cowan, author of : A History of a Pedophile's Wife: Memoir of a Canadian Teacher and Writer

Adam Pope says

Even though I finished, I know I'll be paging through it again as reference. Specifically the chapter the highlights criticisms regarding the biblical patriarchy.

Micebyliz says

realized i already read this book. it's a wonderful historical survey.

Gabrielle Carolina says

My favorite from my Women's History class, combining both pedagogy and feminist theory I loved diving into this text! Now I just have to read the prequel.

Jessica says

Just an amazing overview of the development of the 'feminist consciousness' over time, i.e. the development of women's understanding that they suffer oppression as a group. It's made me realise how underrepresented and ignored women are in the history books I read.

Dana says

This is an important book, however I only give it three stars. It's because I found some of the details a bit too boring, fact-citing, etc. The part about the nuns was also kind of heavy. I can read only so much of texts talking about our Lord the Savior without falling asleep. I enjoyed when the book went more into details of some of the included women's lives. Because they were truly amazing.

Still - I take many great points from this volume. And I can't help but admire the women, who, without any feminist movement, found the courage and strength to make their voices heard. They had to struggle with themselves all the time - their inner (and outer) voices telling them that they are not important enough, etc. I know many women (me included), who still feel this way, and this book can give us courage - I mean, if Hrosvitha did it in 6th century, then we can, too! Right?

And also, I want to remember this sentence: "The definition of those to be kept out was usually not even made explicit, for to have made it explicit would have meant to acknowledge that there was a process of exclusion going on. Those to be kept out were simply obliterated from sight, marginalized out of existence"

Still so relevant.

Stephie Jane Rexroth says

Reading both of Gerda Lerner's books on Women & History has been... consciousness-raising does not do the experience justice. It is as if I have been asleep my entire life, where development, achievement and mere survival have required slogging through a frustrating, nonsensical, exhausting Kafkaesque dream. Now that I am fully awake I can clearly see the inconsistencies, contradictions and constructs of a male-dominated nightmare built upon, attained and maintained by the "systematic silencing of other voices." The shock of waking up is complex: I am both relieved and outraged, inspired and embittered, empowered and rebellious, determined and eager to fight. Lerner has inspired a new era in my own life and self-development, as she has done for countless others in the decades since her first publication.

Though I have copied entire paragraphs throughout the book, the final chapter is one long insightful quote. I will 'limit' my selection to the following paragraphs.

"History shows that for women the right to learn, to teach and to define has always come as the result of political struggle. The structuring of society in such a way that women were to millennia excluded from the creation of the cultural product has more decisively disadvantaged women in their economic and political

rights than any other factor. Unlike men, whose intellectual advancement on the part of men of genius were supported and furthered by institutions, the advances made by individual women of great talent, even in those cases where they were not entirely thwarted and buried without a trace, did not translate into advances for the entire sex. Women as-a-group have made intellectual and educational advances only as a result of organized struggle."

"This new movement for Women's Studies and the integration of women into the curriculum have made spectacular advances in the United States and in the world... While the development is uneven, depending as it does on the existence of women's movements, it is also reversible. Once the basic fallacy of patriarchal thought—the assumption that a half of humankind can adequately represent the whole—has been exposed and explained, it can no more be undone than was the insight that the earth is round, not flat."

"Feminist consciousness consists (1) of the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; (2) the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; (3) the development of a sense of sisterhood; (4) the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and (5) the development of an alternate vision of the future."

"Throughout historical time, women have been discriminated against and disadvantaged economically, politically, legally and sexually. They have, depending on their class, race and ethnic affiliations with men also participated in discriminating against, disadvantaging and exploiting men and women different from themselves by race and class and religion. In short, they have, while being victimized by patriarchy, continued to support the system and helped perpetuate it. They have done so because their consciousness of their own situation could not develop in a manner commensurate with their advancement in other aspects of their lives. Thus, the systematic educational disadvantaging of women and their definition as being persons 'out of history' have been truly the most oppressive aspect of women's condition under patriarchy."

"Human beings have always used history in order to find their direction toward the future: to repeat the past or to depart from it. Lacking knowledge of their own history, women thinkers did not have the self-knowledge from which to project a desired future. Therefore, women have, up until very recently, not been able to create a social theory appropriate to their needs. Feminist consciousness is a prerequisite for the formulation of the kind of abstract thought needed to conceptualize a society in which differences do not connote dominance.

"The hegemony of patriarchal thought in Western civilization is not due to its superiority in content, form and achievement over all other thought; it is built upon the systematic silencing of other voices. Women of all classes, men of different races or religious beliefs from those of the dominant, those defined as deviants by them—all these had to be discouraged, ridiculed, silenced. Above all they had to be kept from being part of the intellectual discourse. Patriarchal thinkers constructed their edifice the way patriarchal statesmen constructed their states: by defining who was to be kept out. The definition of who was to be kept out was usually not even made explicit, for to have made it explicit would have meant to acknowledge that there was a process of exclusion going on. Those to be kept out were simply obliterated from sight, marginalized out of existence."

"It appears then, that there were women as great as the greatest male thinkers and writers, but their

significance and their work have been marginalized and obscured. It appears most likely also that there were many others of equal potential who have been totally silenced and remain forgotten in the long forward march of male dominance over Western civilization. Most important, the female questions, the woman's point of view, the paradigm which would include the female experience has, until very recently, never entered the common discourse.

"But now, the period of patriarchal hegemony over culture has come to an end... [T]he theoretical insights modern feminist scholarship has already achieved have the power to shatter the patriarchal paradigm. Marginalization, ridicule, name-calling, budget-cutting and other devices designed to halt the process of redefining the mental constructs of Western civilization will all, in the long run, have to fail. They can temporarily retard the ongoing process of intellectual transformation, but they cannot stop it..."

"More than thirteen hundred years of individual struggles, disappointments and persistence have brought women to the historic moment when we can reclaim the freedom of our minds as we reclaim our past. The millennia of women's pre-history are at an end. We stand at the beginning of a new epoch in the history of humankind's thought, as we recognize that sex is irrelevant to thought, that gender is a social construct and that woman, like man, makes and defines history."

Danielle says

I want to finish this book someday soon.

ADelicate says

This book seemed to drag longer than the first volume of work. I think its because there were a lot of examples provided on how women used religion to challenge the patriarchy, but it almost seemed like too much time was spent covering this aspect when compared to her other examples about women's challenges to patriarchy (by motherhood, creativity, and authorship). In retrospect, I think this is because a lot of the challenges to the patriarchy first began in religion through biblical interpretation and religious leadership and claims to women having spiritual relationships with God, and this went on for a long time before the other expressions of challenge to patriarchy were expressed.
