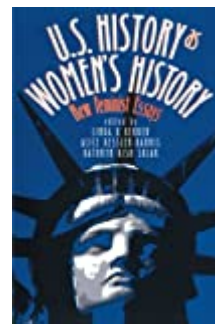


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda K. Kerber Sklar, Alice Kessler-Harris, Kathryn Kish, eds. *U.S. History As Women's History: New Feminist Essays (Gender and American Culture)*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. viii + 477 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2185-5; \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4495-3.



Reviewed by Glenna Matthews (Independent Scholar)

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Given Gerda Lerner's importance to the field of women's history—and her significance to the field of U.S. history more generally—to say that a collection of essays in her honor is worthy of its honoree is high praise. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Lerner is a major figure in late twentieth century intellectual life in this country, because she has asked bigger questions about women and gender than most other scholars and has written daring books in response to the big questions. This collection highlights several distinguished historians from the generation immediately following her, scholars who have also pushed the field in new directions.

When Lerner and her fellow pioneer of women's history Anne Firor Scott first began to toil in this vineyard, women were seen—if seen at all—as marginal to the large processes of history. Only the path-breaking book by Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, which appeared in 1959, had thoroughly broken with this tradition. For the most part, “women” belonged to social history, and social history was “pots and pans” history, all too frequently antiquarian and anecdotal and lacking connective tissue that might link it to large societal change. The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina appeared in 1967, and it set a standard for feminist biography by recovering information about two heroic women who were little

known at the time—while managing to be wonderfully readable. No one could have seen the Grimkes as trivial or marginal after Gerda Lerner. In the intervening years since her first historical work appeared, Lerner helped launch the field of African-American women's history with her documentary collection *Black Women in White America* and also edited another distinguished collection of documents, entitled *The Female Experience*. She has then capped her career with a two-volume synthesis on women and history, *The Creation of Patriarchy* and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*.

This collection in Lerner's honor is divided into three sections: “State Formation,” “Power,” and “Knowledge.” It is impossible in the compass of a review to mention all its strengths and very difficult to single out those contributions that seem most impressive. It should be stated at the outset that in the opinion of this reviewer there is not a weak link in the chain. That said, I would like to focus primarily on those articles that intersect directly with my own work.

Until twenty years ago or so, when the subject of women and politics received any attention at all, this attention tended to be confined to the admittedly important topic of suffrage. Women lacked the vote, they organized to get it, then they got it—that was the narrative line. A generation of women's history has immensely

enriched and complicated the story. Women's battle for full citizenship has encompassed far more than the elective franchise, as Linda Kerber has demonstrated heretofore. Her article in this collection deals with further aspects of citizenship and reveals her at the top of her form. She shows that the old English common law practice of married women being "covered" by their husbands for legal and civic purposes was so thoroughly embedded in custom and in the law that, for much of the American past "[t]he argument that duties to husbands and families trump duties to the public and to the state continued to permeate the controversy over civic obligation" (p. 27).

Taken together with the articles by Nancy Cott on marriage and citizenship, by Linda Gordon on the origins of the welfare state, as well as by Kathryn Kish Sklar and by Alice Kessler-Harris on aspects of American public policy, Kerber's work makes manifest that gender and state formation is one of the hot topics for current scholarship. Revolutionary upheavals and wars create new gender roles, and changing gender roles may create anxieties that lead to political instability. As a student of mine exclaimed after reading Lynn Hunt's *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* in a course on comparative gender systems, "You blow the lid off absolutism, you blow the lid off patriarchy!"—at least for a while.

Articles by Joyce Antler on the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs and by Amy Swerdlow on the Congress of American Women make an especially useful contribution, because they provide a past for the honoree herself. In her pre-professional historian days Lerner belonged to these organizations (both of which are now defunct), and their left politics, commitment to social justice for African-Americans, and belief in the value of women's history help us to understand the context in which Gerda Lerner developed her passionate commitment to her life's work. According to Antler, for example, "At the Emmas' first annual Mothers' Day luncheon in 1951 members read poems of peace commemorating the struggles of women written by Gerda Lerner" (p. 285).

Another particularly appropriate contribution in the light of Lerner's work is that by Nell Painter. Based on research into the life of Sojourner Truth, the article employs the term "soul murder" to discuss the abuse meted out to African-Americans during slavery and the impact of such abuse on its victims. Rejecting the earlier argument by Stanley Elkins about the psychological damage wrought by what Elkins saw as the "total institution," Painter advances the state of the historiography on

slavery by also rejecting versions of this ugly past which might be taken as downplaying the terrible toll-on abuser and abused alike.

I have relatively minor criticisms of two articles and one more consequential in nature about the overall structure of the collection. First of all, for my money, in her impressive treatment of the generation gap between sixties feminists and their mothers, Ruth Rosen focuses too narrowly on those women whose rejection of their mothers' roles and lives was so thoroughgoing as to warrant the term "matrphobia." She tells us that she interviewed more than one hundred women, but she doesn't tell us how she located them. Her footnotes indicate interviews in Berkeley and New York City, but many thousands of women came to a feminist analysis during those years, and some did not live in the metropole. Perhaps some may have seen their mothers' lives as stunted, while also admiring the spirit with which Mom coped. It is certainly true that the media portrait of the archetypal feminist played up matrphobia as an attitude. Therefore, I believe that it is all the more necessary for a scholar to cast a broad net to determine whether this portrait was accurate for a full range of women, white and non-white alike.

I would also take slight issue with Jane De Hart in her superb piece on the recent history of women in elective office. The book she and Donald Mathews co-authored, *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of ERA*, has led the profession to expect balance, fairness, and careful parsing of differences among women from Jane De Hart. Her piece in this collection delivers more of the same. Where I disagree, it is a question of nuance and emphasis. I think that she should have made more of the changing patterns of female authority throughout society, changes whereby female politicians seem less anomalous than even ten years earlier. I believe this development can help explain the extraordinary debut on the national stage by California Senator Dianne Feinstein. Fewer than twenty-five women have served in the U.S. Senate since 1920. This is a very small pool. None has ever become a key player to the extent that Feinstein did in the 103rd Congress—she had a major role in the passage of the ban on assault weapons and in the passage of the California Desert Protection Act—and certainly none ever had so high a profile as a freshman. The fact that we now have more female bosses, college presidents, and entrepreneurs than ever before in American history seems germane to Feinstein's success.

My major criticism is the fact that the collection

leaves out so much of the female experience in the United States. It will surely be seen—and seen appropriately—as defining the state of the art after a generation of writing on the history of American women. I therefore think that the lacunae are regrettable. Nothing about working-class women and their unions. Nothing about women in their domestic lives. And nothing about women in their religious and spiritual lives. This latter omission is especially unfortunate, given what Lerner argues in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* about the primacy of religion as an arena for female self-authorization up to the modern period.

I believe that as valuable as it is to explore what women have achieved in hitherto male roles and to document how they have been “present at the creation” of significant developments in American public policy, it is also important to explore and document what women have done to nurture humanity throughout history. Thanks to the growth and development of fields

such as the study of material culture, it is now possible to write about this topic with a subtlety and sophistication light years removed from the old style “pots and pans” history.

We are so far from solving the knotty problems of balancing work lives with family necessities for women and men who are the parents of young children or the offspring of elderly and failing parents that we need to know as much as possible about the history of caring as an essential activity. To ignore this dimension of life in a volume which is sure to enjoy great prominence, it seems to me, is to help perpetuate the invisibility of “women’s work” and to make it harder to think effectively about what comes next.

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