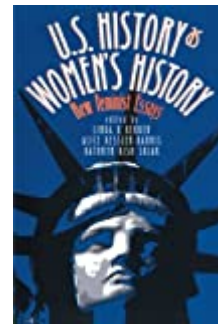


H-Net Reviews

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 Lori D. Ginzberg (Pennsylvania State University)

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This is a book that can be, demands to be, reviewed on several different levels. On the one hand, it is a collection of fifteen new essays in American women's history that honors Gerda Lerner. On the other hand, it is itself an historical document, and as such insists on a different kind of reading and critique.

Let me begin with the first, more traditional, reading. Loosely drawn together around themes of power and knowledge these essays reflect concerns that are relatively new for women's historians—mainly, about the ways in which gendered institutions and forms of knowledge both construct and are influenced by policy-making and state formation. While the editors have made no pretense of being either inclusive or definitive in their choice of articles, they see the final selection as evidence that women's history has begun to “radically unsettle historical narratives as they had been written,” and has reached the “fourth stage of development predicted by Lerner nearly two decades ago.” “Individually and together,” the editors write, “these essays seek to discover how gender serves to legitimize particular constructions of power and knowledge, to meld these into accepted practice and state policy.” (pp. 6-7)

These essays are new in some senses but not in others and, as with all collections, they vary in quality and originality. Some of them reflect strikingly new work

on the part of important historians; others represent revisions and challenges to that historian's own previous work. Linda Kerber, responding to work on citizenship that focuses on rights, introduces the notion of obligation, and argues that the history of those obligations (notably those involving obedience to the state, paying taxes, serving on juries, and military service) like that of rights, is gendered. Kathryn Kish Sklar, writing about the National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation, Linda Gordon, on the “putting children first” strategy of early twentieth-century welfare advocates, Alice Kessler-Harris, on the Social Security Amendments of 1939, and Nancy Cott, on the place of marriage in state formation and power, demonstrate the sharply gendered nature of public policy debates and strategies.

A number of articles look at organizational or biographical histories in new ways. William Chafe, for instance, utilizes new scholarship on the private lives of Eleanor Roosevelt and Allard Lowenstein to explicate the complexities of the phrase “the personal is political.” Judith Leavitt explores the gendered assumptions in public health policy by focusing on the treatment and infamy of Mary Mallon (“Typhoid Mary”) and Jennie Barmore. Jane Sherron deHart discusses female political styles in the 1970s ERA movement as well as among women candi-

dates, distinguishing between what she terms the politics of citizenship and the politics of representation. Joyce Antler and Amy Swerdlow have contributed two fascinating organizational histories of the left, Antler on the Emma Lazarus Federation and Swerdlow on the little-known Congress of American Women. Barbara Sicherman rereads *Little Women* and explores its ongoing (and quite varied) appeal to women of different classes and experiences. Ruth Rosen explores the dual generation gap of the 1950s, arguing that young women experienced a far different—and more ambivalent—relationship to their same-sex parent than did young men. Fittingly in a volume that opens with a tribute to Gerda Lerner, Darlene Clark Hine's closing article relates her experience in compiling *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*.

While each of these articles could surely provoke its own debate, for me a couple of them point in strikingly new directions. Nell Painter probes historical psychological questions about the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of slave children, which she uses to understand the formation of American character. While preliminary, her article is both provocative and original, a major step in reframing questions about personality that had been stranded by the debate swirling around Stanley Elkins's book, *Slavery*. In another vein, Estelle Freedman's piece on Miriam Van Waters reopens questions about periodization, specifically about the continuities in female support networks and separatism after 1920.

This said, I must admit that overall I did not find the book's contents to be as "radically unsettling" as I had hoped. There is a great deal here that is about organizations, about white people, about elite women, about the Progressive era and beyond and about some version of "maternalism." But there are no essays that deal centrally with sexuality or queer theory, none that address the important questions being raised about Native Americans or westward expansion or, indeed, the experience of nation-building in the West. Nor am I convinced that traditional political or policy historians will find this volume more inescapable than previous ones in its challenges to their (still dominant) narratives. My point here is not that any volume of women's history could have covered the range of topics currently being explored or imagined; rather it is that this particular project, in both its conception and execution, reflects the experience and thinking of a cohort of scholars perhaps more than its editors admit.

This is the second level on which this book should be

read. *U.S. History as Women's History* is not so much a "state of the art" survey of American women's history as it is a statement of the thinking of a particular generation of women's historians. As the editors state, "Each of the contributors to this volume found her or his own path to women's history in the years between 1967 and 1972. Trekking through unfamiliar terrain, each of us encountered Gerda Lerner..." (p. 2) There is a tone here of youthful endeavor, and an evident and deserved relish in forging an intellectual frontier. There is less sense of this group and its intellectual endeavors as but one part of a larger, multi-layered historical setting. A tribute to Gerda Lerner and a collection of scholarship by fifteen important women's historians, this is nevertheless also a statement about one group in one era of women's history writing—a specific trajectory of analysis about women, gender, and power developed by a small cohort now well-established in American colleges and universities.

I wish this book's authors and editors had been more self-conscious about their own place, not simply as followers of Gerda Lerner, but as a canon of sorts, themselves already followed, debated with, and challenged. I wish the book had demonstrated a critical awareness about the particular intellectual moment that it represents. Lacking that quality, the book suffers from a certain (surprising) a-historical complacency.

Even as I write this I am confronted by the complicated questions of status and stature that I want the authors to have raised explicitly. After all, although a number of these historians have been formative in my own thinking (and one of them—Nancy Cott—was my advisor), I'm part of the cohort that followed. I, too, live to some extent within the world of my generation and its assumptions (just ask my students, who often notice that many of the historians who are my friends also happen to think much as I do about history). I too have tenure and publications and a certain institutional perspective. My students—and certainly women's historians who don't reside in academia—surely see the challenges before us in a way quite different from my own. But that is my point. As historians, we should be far more conscious of our own place in the historiographical traditions of which we are part, and more certain that those behind us, rather than those before, will provide the questions that will radically unsettle the answers we begin to think we have.

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