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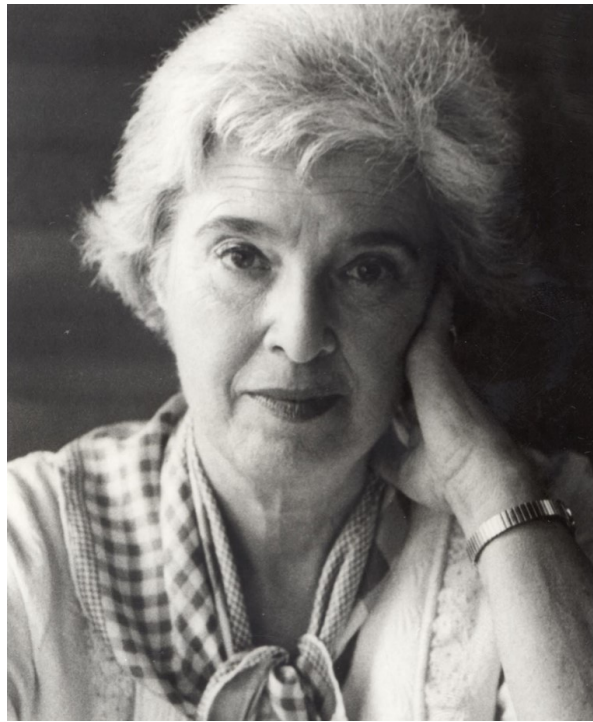
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## ***Gerda Lerner: historical knowledge and feminist consciousness***



**Sources:** <https://tribunafeminista.org/>

*Our author, Gerda Lerner (Vienna, 1920 – Madison, USA, 2013), was a researcher, teacher and feminist of Austrian origin who was forced to emigrate to the US in 1939 fleeing Nazi persecution.*

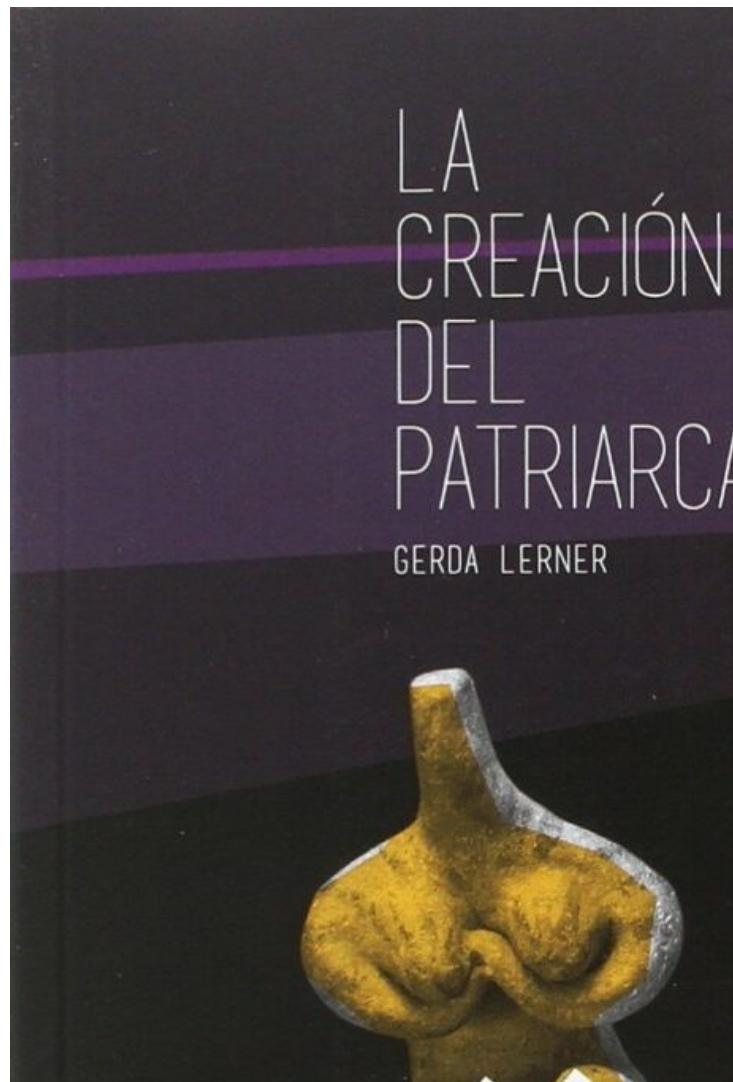
In North America she developed a brilliant career being one of the pioneers in introducing Women's History in college (Lerner, 1979; Lerner, 2002). *The Creation of Feminist*

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*Consciousness, from the Middle Ages to 1870*, was published in 1993 and constitutes the second part of a larger work that Gerda Lerner titled *Women and History*. Let's see below the context of production of the work.

In the broad framework of questioning the social, political or cultural relations fostered by capitalism and the instrumental reason of modernity throughout the 60s of the last century, one of the most important critical currents was the so-called "radical feminism" that developed a great intellectual and political activity. In 1966 the famous women's movement, *National Organization for Women*, NOW, or in 1967 the *New York Radical Women*, whose *performances* would have a great impact. On the other hand, the conquest of citizenship, political rights and access to education in the twentieth century by feminist movements in the West made possible the construction of an essential theoretical corpus that will have a great social impact. In this context of effervescence, Lerner was part of the debates regarding the perspectives that should be combined to address the knowledge of the female historical experience as an inexcusable reference for the process of emancipation of women in twentieth-century capitalism. Once again, becoming aware of the situation promoted both the systematic recovery of women's memory and the convenience of assuming intellectual and political independence to guide demands considered their own. Thus, from Marxism, psychoanalysis, anticolonialism, critical theory or feminism, new collectives claimed space and capacity to produce meanings, interpret reality and try to modify it.



The emergence of women's history should be inserted in this scenario in parallel with the development of feminist movements and the theoretical-practical assumptions that they had been analyzing and experiencing, that is, that the subordination of women went beyond political or institutional inequalities: it was systemic and based on deep structures that were rooted in social and cultural dynamics capable of permeating everyday life; In such a way that power relations were evident not only in the public sphere but also in the (supposed) private and personal spaces, that is, "the personal was political". *The creation of feminist consciousness...* It is, in our opinion, indebted to this framework, even if it saw the light later—with the "new spirit of capitalism" already underway and with the abandonment of a part of feminism from its ties to political economy and critical social theory—by combining intellectual commitment and social transformation at a time when women claim to be historical subjects and objects of research.



### **Historical knowledge: the place of women**

Lerner understands history as a transformative project so that dialogue with the past conceives it as a necessary condition to explain ourselves as subjects and collectives from the questions that challenge us in the present. In this sense, memory and its recovery becomes a key factor of emancipation. The fact that the conventional historical narrative has not echoed the knowledge and lives of women is not only a cognitive deficiency: it also means, the author points out, that women have remained alienated from our collective experience, a necessary basis for reflection and action, until just a few decades ago. A situation that is far from being resolved today and that is not without political, social and educational implications:

History that is mostly written, taught and researched, remains a History in which women appear accidentally and only in the precise cases. That is, women have not yet been recognized as a social subject and, therefore, as a historical subject in a majority way (Segura Graíño, 2015, p. 270).

Because, although it is true that some women appear in the annals, often, as "exceptions", the perspectives of famous thinkers on women, sexes, sexuality, family, etc., is still considered from feminist perspectives, a history of men. Thus, the history of women that

begins to emerge in the 70s of the twentieth century will imply profound changes that affect the very concept of History that was handled until that moment. The historians were aware that they needed to include, first, interpretive and conceptual frameworks appropriate to their objectives and interests. The historical account, eminently androcentric, did not have epistemological or methodological tools for this purpose because it had been based on a single look, supposedly *universal*, on reality.

### **Feminist consciousness and women's history**

Concepts such as feminist *identity* (Amorós, de Miguel, 2018) or *feminist consciousness* (Lerner 2019) have been necessary when it comes to recovering the history and movements of emancipation of women from the idea that defends the equality of rights between men and women and that questions, therefore, the structures that sustain the various ways in which inequality unfolds. Thus, the development of feminist consciousness would require a *cognitive praxis* in which knowledge and action feed each other. So, in this process of awareness, it is essential to decode the dominant paradigms that configure and materialize the social relations of injustice in order to resignify them and, in parallel, the collective action that promotes social changes. In this sense, one could think of a feminism *avant la lettre* in historical epochs in which critiques of the discourse of female inferiority were articulated from different perspectives. From this position, Lerner understands that there has been a consciousness of subordination throughout history that has generated reflections, analysis and resistance and whose historical dating would be prior to the struggle for the achievement of social and political rights (Lerner, 2017). In this line is inscribed the work of our author when it comes to rescuing the history of women as a historical agent (both in the tasks of reproduction and in the productive field), and when it comes to mapping the emergence of the consciousness of subalternity and the ways of questioning it, present over the centuries in a discontinuous way – a task of Penelope – but recurrent, constant (a fact that allows us to understand historically that famous figures, such as M. Wollstonecraft, are part of a chain).

To this end, Lerner undertook an ambitious interdisciplinary study on the genealogy of sexual domain structures (*The Creation of Patriarchy*, 1986). The analyses on this issue were enlightening because they revealed the anthropological and historical roots of the patriarchal system and allowed to delegitimize the hierarchical relations between men and women, supposedly natural. *Patriarchy* (or "gender-sex" system), another essential concept of radical feminism (Hartmann, 1976), was thus evident as a structure of domination based on sex that had adapted to different historical contexts and that implied

an entire institutional, normative or discursive fabric that resulted in an unequal distribution and access to material and symbolic resources between men and women. For Lerner, this previous study was crucial because it allowed him to map the construction of a world tailored to men and interpret that the subordination of women within the same group had great transcendence because it historically preceded and functioned as a model to establish and legitimize other hierarchies, such as the master-slave relationship (Lerner, 2017, p. 133). A dissymmetry that remains nuclear to build significant power relations in society.

After the first part of *Women and History*, the researcher was able to dedicate herself to *The creation of feminist consciousness*. to trace the historical patterns of emergence of feminist consciousness as well as the historical circumstances under which they took place, focusing its study on Western Europe (mainly Germany, France, England and Italy) and the USA. Its objective was to document and include the critical activity of women who reflected on their situation as a collective and who therefore contributed to fostering that self-awareness; but also to incorporate other voices that, although lacking that purpose, influenced the process of cracking of the system of domination of patriarchy.

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\* The full article was published in *Con-Ciencia Social* (second epoch), 4, 125-138.

<https://ojs.uv.es/index.php/con-cienciasocial/article/view/19107>

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