

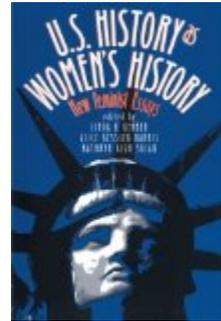
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar Linda K. Kerber, eds. *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. viii + 477 pp.

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.

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Margaret Atwood ends her brilliant and haunting dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* with the proceedings of a future historical conference where the participants are examining the historical artifact that comprises the main part of the novel. The audio tapes that were the Handmaid's tale were found after the oppressive regime which it described had long since ended. Sources from the period, particularly about women, are hard to come by, fragmented, and hard to use. Women lost all independent identity in the former nation of Gilead, required to conform to a set of predetermined female roles (obviously, our narrator was a handmaid whose role was to provide children to the household) and given names which reflected the head of the household. (Our narrator was Offred, Of Fred.) The historian providing the analysis of the document attempts to verify or cross reference, establish with some degree of authenticity, the events, people, and practices described in the document. Much can be established but many questions remain. The historian, lyrically concludes, "As all historians know, the past is great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day." (p. 394-395) As it was in the fictional Gilead, so it was in much of our real human history; women have been harder to find in recorded history.

The Handmaid's Tail is a chilling rendering of a United

States ruled by the religious right. But, more wrenching for me as a historian was a seemingly benign aside by Atwood's fictional historian of the future. "...[I]n my opinion," he states, "we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure, but to understand. (Applause.)" (p. 383) Any reader would think it impossible and even bizarre to refrain from moral judgment after having gone through the previous 350 pages, yet, aren't these phrases familiar to historians? Don't many still hold to notion that holding and making explicit a moral/political/religious perspective implicates the historian's findings?

One of the most important lessons that I learned from Gerda Lerner when I first encountered her as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin was that being a feminist and being a good historian were not mutually exclusive. In fact, and this is revived and renewed every time I have the opportunity to see or meet with her, these two seemingly separate "identities" are rightly interconnected, the one informing and enriching the other. Not only is teaching, writing, and speaking about women's history a political act, in and of itself, women's history is a useable past, a vital part of the establishment of a women's group identity and consciousness which is the

precondition for organized efforts to improve women's lives. Dr. Lerner exemplifies this by not only generating and supporting the scholarship, but also through a lifetime of artist/political activism/organizational work, all a part of what she referred to as "the work," in the inscription of my copy of *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*. We must be true to the past, to the best of our ability while we see, name, and reveal injustice.

In the world of women's history scholarship, this enterprise has produced some of the most exciting, vital work of the last twenty-five years. The best women's history has not only added women's story to traditional narratives, but also it has used women-centered historical narratives to challenge, modify, disrupt, or even render irrelevant standard categories and methodologies. Women's history challenges us to revisit the political act of history-making. An attention to women in history has sensitized historians to ideas about the constructions of the feminine in particular, and constructions of gender (femininity and masculinity) in general. Once a historian becomes aware of the power of gender as a category of historical analysis, it is hard to imagine how anyone could read the episode of "Typhoid Mary," or twentieth century debates about welfare, to take just two examples from the book, without at least some consideration of the gendered assumptions, language, and the implications for women. Gerda Lerner was also one of the earliest women's historians to take care to represent the variety of female experience. From this sensitivity to race, class, ethnicity, and age has come a rich new scholarship which has explored the inextricable interconnectedness of women's multiple identities.

U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays, edited by Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar is a worthy tribute to Gerda Lerner's life and contributions to the historical profession. Far more eloquently than I have done, the editors describe and assess the history and state of women's history in a clear and useful introduction. The fifteen articles included are grouped under three general categories "State Formation," "Power," and "Knowledge." The authors represent some of the most eminent, respected, senior scholars in women's history in the U.S. today. Along with Gerda Lerner, they have contributed not only to creating the field of women's history, but also establishing the highest standards for those of us who follow. One of the characteristics of the volume that I found very appealing was the analytical and methodological range. An "outsider" reading this volume would have a hard time describing an orthodoxy in women's history. There are in-

stitutional histories, biographies, literary analysis/reader response, psycho-history, legal histories. Pieces like Darlene Clark Hine's, which described her co-editing the two volume encyclopedia *Black Women in America* reminds us of the painstaking but still-vital task of female list making, (which, as Gerda Lerner describes in her *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, began as "sister books" by 14th and 15th century, German-speaking nuns.) Nancy Cott's article on marriage law breaks apart standard assumptions about the public/private dichotomy. And, Judith Leavitt analyzes how the case of 'typhoid Mary' (the middle aged Irish cook who carried the disease infecting some members of the wealthy families for whom she worked) in early twentieth century New York informed how public health officials understood and treated working-class/ethnic women. Many authors of the pieces explicitly made the connection between their approach or subject matter and Gerda Lerner. Amy Swerdlow, in her article on the short-lived progressive, feminist, Congress of American Women, described how Gerda Lerner was "one of the leaders of the Los Angeles chapter, which in 1949 offered its members a seminar in women's history." (306) I must admit that reading every single piece in this anthology was extremely satisfying and useful. Each piece contributes to and continues the creation of knowledge on women and gender in United States history.

As a state-of-the-art in the field of U.S. Women's History, it is hard to find fault with this volume without sounding like one is quibbling, but I have one minor critique and one major critique and I will start with the former. I was not always clear about the correspondence between the headings and the articles that were included within them. In fact, so many of these articles were concerned with the State/Knowledge/Power that perhaps some other explanatory headings would have helped? For example, Nell Painter's piece about the psychological toll slavery took on the young and how that has been understood historiographically, Barbara Sicherman's analysis of the effect the novel *Little Women* has had on generations of young women, and Ruth Rosen's "The Female Generation Gap: Daughters of the Fifties and the Origins of Contemporary American Feminism," all contribute to information about and conceptualizations of the history of female childhood and adolescence. This contribution is never analyzed and the articles are separated; Painter's piece appears in the section on Power while Sicherman's and Rosen's are in the section on Knowledge.

My major critique of the volume reflects what my

own vision of a tribute to Gerda Lerner should look like. I would have made more explicit larger connections between U.S. women's history and women's studies scholarship in general (including feminist theory), U.S. women's history and the feminist movement, and, U.S. women's history and pedagogy.

Even though the editors of the volume do claim that they did not ask for any specific area to be covered in the articles, they admit that the authors were rarely explicit about the problems of method or the theoretical implications of their work. However, in another excellent, recent anthology, *Feminists Revision History*, editor Ann-Louise Shapiro, cites Alice Kessler-Harris' assessment that "historical scholarship no longer seemed the leading edge of feminist work, providing neither the source of energy nor the catalyst for change." (19) Shapiro continues that, while, "there is obviously no single feminist theory," ". . . that feminist theory is not just important for history, but that history must reciprocally inform feminist theory. (p. 15 and 16) My critique is not that the authors and editors ignored theory; it is that there is no direct consideration of the issue of the relationship between women's history and feminist theory in the volume.

Shapiro also describes that an important contribution of the authors of her volume is that they address the political act of women's and gender history; they, "reject the dichotomy between professionalism and politics as they negotiate the intersections of academic work, historical memory, and life outside the academy." (16) Almost every single article in *U.S. History as Women's History* has significant contemporary policy implications, yet, in this volume, almost every author falls short of making the applications of their historical insights clear for present-day debates and problems and most importantly, how these insights need to get translated into action. (I need to add, though, to be fair, that I am well aware that the historians in this volume have made these connections in other writings and speeches.)

Finally, anyone who has seen Gerda Lerner "work" in a classroom could not fail to include a consideration of pedagogy in a tribute to her. I would have enjoyed

seeing some consideration of how U.S. women's history scholars have been altering the syllabi of their Women's History courses and traditional U.S. History surveys as a result of the new work in women's history. [For the last few years the *Radical History Review* has been reprinting syllabi of interesting courses, for example.] In other words, how has this scholarship translated into changed practice in our classrooms.

The importance of directly addressing these issues has become clear to me as a result of ten years of teaching U.S. Women's History on the undergraduate and graduate levels at Michigan State University. My undergraduate women's history classes have enrolled between 50 to 150 students each semester and at the end of end semester students will invariably come up to me and ask me "what can I do?" It is a gratifying question because it means I have brought about an awareness of women's position in U.S. society grounded in historical understanding, but I am always at a loss as to what to say. I am not sure I have disappointed the students by my answers (which varies depending on what I know about the student) but I am always frustrated by my lack of a ready response. I am not suggesting that we send around membership cards for the National Organization of Women at the end of our classes, but just that we need to participate in a self-conscious discussion about the connections between our pedagogy, our scholarship, and our activism. It is our responsibility to explore how our work can ensure that there will never be Gilead in America.

Dr. Lerner, Thank you! You have been a constant inspiration.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale* New York: Ballentine Books, 1985. Shapiro, Ann-Louise, *Feminists Revision History* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

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