

The Creation of Patriarchy

By Gerda Lerner

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Gerda Lerner was born in 1920 in Austria. She emigrated to the United States in 1939 and completed her Masters and Doctorate degrees at Columbia University and concluded her graduate studies in 1967. She was the director of the graduate program in women's history at Sarah Lawrence from 1972 to 1976 and from 1978 to 1979 and throughout her life helped



establish many graduate programs in women's history (*Oak and the World of the Web*).

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Lerner explores the origins of women's subordinate roles to men in society. This summary is inspired by the last chapter of the book, which is titled "The Creation of Patriarchy". She starts historically by referring to the Neolithic period when women were exchanged between tribes for practicality purposes. Indeed, societies that had more women could produce more children and therefore have more labour at hand for agriculture and consequently produce more surpluses. These exchanges led to the commodification of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity by men. During warfare, men, as warriors, conquered other tribes and captured members of the "enemy": men, women and children. In order to exercise power over these captives and make them slaves, men justified their control by the most apparent difference, often sex. The captured were treated differently depending on the sex: men were workers and women providers of sexual services, reproduction, as well as workers.

In societies, the status of men and women was based on very different things as a consequence of the already subordinate role of women. Men were judged by their resources for production, what they owned, including the commodity of female sexual services; women's status was determined through their sexual ties to a man and his resources for production. Moreover, women who did not conform to these heterosexual roles still had to depend on a male dominant figure in their own family, such as a brother, or were simply declassified. Traditionally, women were subordinate to men all their lives and could not grow out of it. Throughout the years, women simply went from one male protector, the father, to another, the husband. Furthermore, a woman's marriage partner was chosen in line with her family's interest. Women were also deprived of the right to be educated and were left out of History. With nothing to base alternatives on, women were left to the oppression of patriarchy. According to Lerner, "it is this feature of male hegemony which has been most damaging to women and has ensured their subordinate status for millennia." (223).

Patriarchy nevertheless survived with the cooperation of women. According to Lerner,

"This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women." (217).

Even during the last century, as well as today in most of the underdeveloped countries, women are marginal and dependent on the protection of male kin. The small

number of independent, self-supporting women in various societies are usually highly vulnerable to economic disaster. Today, our challenge is to “step outside of patriarchal thought” (228) by trusting and valuing our female experience and thought even though it has been marginalized and trivialized for the past 2500 years.

## Works Cited

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986

Oak and the world of the Web. Consulted March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Ohio University.

<http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~baxter/hist381/terms/lerner.htm>