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REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

The Origins of Patriarchy:

Gender and Class in the Ancient World

Virginia Hunter

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

Stephanie Coontz and Peta Henderson, eds., *Women's Work, Men's Property. The Origins of Gender and Class* (London: Verso 1986).

DO WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY HAVE anything to tell us about male dominance? The premise of both these books is that they do. In order to argue this position, Gerda Lerner has produced a work of great complexity and some daring: it should provoke serious discussion. Lerner herself is an American historian, a professor of History, and the author of several books in Women's History. As such, she criticizes the theoretical work of modern feminists as ahistorical, a situation she sets out to change by offering nothing less than a feminist theory of history. Her basic thesis is that patriarchy as a system is historical and had a beginning in history: her aim is to understand the process whereby it became established and institutionalized. But in order to gain this understanding, she was led back to the fourth millennium B.C., where she spent eight years studying the history of ancient Mesopotamia. She defines patriarchy as "the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance

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over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general."(239) Her purpose, then, is to explain this dominance and, as a corollary, to trace the social construction of gender in Western civilization.

Such an enterprise is, of course, based on the assumption that something preceded patriarchy. But what? In order to answer this question, Lerner was driven even further back to prehistory. Chapter 1 begins with a rejection of both the notion that female subordination is "universal and natural" and the variety of explanations that support this view from biology (and sociobiology) to psychology. Lerner also rejects the search for a matriarchy and the "maternalist principles" of the nineteenth-century evolutionists Bachofen and Morgan. But not quite, for she singles out their Marxist successor, Engels, for high praise for establishing the theoretical framework of all future researches. Engels's major contribution was to link "sexual relations to changing social relations."(23) Lerner herself professes to work within the Engelsian paradigm, which is both socio-economic and processual.

There is more. For Lerner also accepts the theoretical formulations of Claude Lévi-Strauss about the "exchange of women." But with a difference. Briefly her picture is as follows: the first sexual division of labour was based on reproductive differences and reflected women's child-bearing and child-rearing capacities. But this was a culturally, rather than a biologically, determined choice, since it was both functional and advantageous to those who adopted it. Moreover, in egalitarian societies, those of hunter-gatherers, for example, where a sexual division of labour is already established, male and female functions complement one another and the relative status of the sexes is "separate but equal."(29)[1] What role, then, did the exchange of women play in female subordination? Developing with agriculture in the Neolithic period, such exchange commodified women's reproductive capacities. Women became a resource. Here Lerner elaborates a complex position put forth by Meillassoux and Aaby.[2] Control over women's sexuality, they argue, preceded the acquisition of private property. It is this that is sought in the exchange and even the capture of women, since reproducers are essential for survival. In time, out of the labour of women as reproducers, private property was created: "in the course of the agricultural revolution the exploitation of human labor and the sexual exploitation of women became inextricably linked."(52) Lerner's framework is thus drawn from both Engels and Lévi-Strauss: she has wed the two.

[1]See E. Leacock, "Women in Egalitarian Societies," in R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston 1977), 11-35.

[2]C. Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (Cambridge 1981); P. Aaby, "Engels and Women," *Critique of Anthropology*, 3 (1977), 25-53. I presume the above is the book from which Lerner derived her synopsis of Meillassoux. Curiously, she fails to provide a reference at the appropriate point.

The editors of *Women's Work* should not disagree with Lerner.[3] For their two excellent essays in this volume complement her work. Chapter 3, in particular, "Property Forms, Political Power and Female Labour in the Origins of Class and State Societies," is a *tour de force*, offering insights into the evolution of "kin-corporate societies and gender relations."(116) Isolating marriage rules, Coontz and Henderson point to the disadvantages that accrue to the sex that moves at marriage in being separated from direct control over natal group property and becoming "a producer but non-owner in the household of another kin corporation."(122) In this way, patrilocal residence had devastating effects on women. Further, "the social relations inherent in patrilocality" could have initiated ranking and social stratification through "their greater ability to channel labour and prestige into a single local lineage, thus creating the potential for the development of inter-lineage inequality."(138) Again the domination of women precedes private property. Again it is the foundation for the emergence of class society.

In believing that this transformation is the outcome of a gradual social and economic evolution, Coontz and Henderson disagree with N. Chevillard and S. Leconte, the authors of Chapter 2, "The Dawn of Lineage Society: The Origins of Women's Oppression." The latter posit a rupture within societies originally organized matrilineally and matrilocally. Instead of evolution, there was "violent upheaval" within a small number of groups, out of which came a ruling class of men.(107) Chevillard and Leconte produce no evidence for this hypothesis but depend on mythologies of conflict between men and women, which they interpret quite literally. In fact, their work is singularly devoid of documentation. It does not bear comparison, either theoretically or empirically, with the essay of Coontz and Henderson.

To return to Lerner's book, we now enter history proper and written sources, the area in which Lerner makes her own contribution. Her thesis is elaborated in Chapters 3-5, which cover early Mesopotamian history from the fourth to the second millennium B.C. Here Lerner documents the development and sharpening of patriarchal features both in the family and in the archaic state.

She first considers the evidence for the status and power of queens and other women of influence at the Sumerian court. In the third millennium in particular women's status was high: they owned property, they could sue, they took part in business, and they composed poetry and love-songs. In this period, the exchange of women took the form of dynastic marriages, as women became "pawns of their families' diplomatic designs."(67) They also functioned as the stand-in wives or deputies of kings. Powerful they were,

[3]The book is a joint project of American and French writers whose independent researches were conjoined in this collaboration. Its contributors are historians, economists, and anthropologists.

but entirely dependent on men. At this juncture, Lerner isolates a new set of relationships, in which "some men acquired power over other men and over all women."(75) This she characterizes as the "female world of the social contract," wherein women, who have no means of autonomy, depend for their own security and that of their children on the protection of men. In the archaic state, in other words, before formal law-codes had developed, before the institutionalization of the state, and before the articulation of patriarchal ideology, patriarchal relations already prevailed.

The archaic state also included the presence of concubines and slaves. In Chapter 4 Lerner looks directly at slavery, arguing that women's oppression preceded and made possible the domination of others. For all the evidence indicates that the enslavement of women and children preceded general enslavement. Such slaves were then incorporated into the society and households of their captors. Adopting Patterson's definitions and particularly his concept of dishonour,[4] Lerner points to a specific kind of dishonour experienced by women slaves — rape. What Patterson ignores, she stresses: the difference in the way slavery is experienced by men and women. For the latter, it has meant sexual use by the master. As long as class society has prevailed, she argues, "sexual dominance of higher class males over lower class women has been the very mark of women's class oppression."(89) Historically, too, the enslavement of women and children was the model for the enslavement of men, as more sophisticated techniques developed which would make slavery's extension possible. For women themselves, the invention of slavery led to degrees of unfreedom. In a hierarchical order, the highest position was held by the free married woman, the lowest by the woman slave, and in the middle, the slave-concubine. Each position on this hierarchy, however, flowed from the status of the men upon whom these women depended.

Chapter 5, an analysis of Mesopotamian and Biblical laws, including the Hammurabic Code (ca. 1750), reveals the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as a significant arm of state power. Here again Lerner discerns a "new sort of power relationship," that of the husband over his wife.(110) There is also a sharpening of the double standard and for the first time public law begins to enter into realms that were hitherto private, making the control of female sexuality a matter for the state. Both abortion and adultery, for example, are severely and publicly punished. In this chapter, Lerner returns to her theme of the degrees of unfreedom of women. "All women," she points out, "are increasingly under sexual dominance and regulation, but the degree of their unfreedom varies by class."(112) Wife and slave should not, however, be confused, for whatever limitations the wife experienced, she had distinct legal and economic rights and profited from the labour of the slave.

[4]O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Harvard 1982).

To confuse the two, to suggest that women are a class, is to introduce a mystification and to render "actual class relations invisible." In the next chapter, Lerner develops this point to show how the veil was used to distinguish among respectable and non-respectable women, and between free, married women and slaves, the former being under one man's protection and control, the latter, "public women." It is thus through their sexual ties to men that women become part of a class.

Lerner's views about class are in direct conflict with those of Chevillard and Leconte, put forth in a chapter in *Women's Property* entitled "Slavery and Women." The point of this essay is to show that in a slave system free women are not part of the ruling class, even though they share to some degree in its life and privileges. For while women are required to guarantee the reproduction of the free portion of society, they themselves are "merely hostages."(168) Thus they do not stand in an antagonistic relationship to slaves. In other words, women are an oppressed class. I agree with Lerner that this confounding of class and gender obscures class relations. It seems to me that she is correct to link class and gender at one level, but also to draw a firm distinction between them.

The rest of the book concerns itself with religion and symbols, or ideology. It documents the powers and worship of early goddesses (the Great Mother, for example) and their dethroning, fragmentation, and ultimately, their replacement by male divinities, a process that culminated in Hebrew monotheism. Lerner includes here an interesting discussion of the Book of Genesis and the levels that come to light there, revealing earlier religious symbols subsumed or suppressed and divine sanction given to the subordination of women. She ends with a discussion of Greek thought (Hesiod, Aeschylus, Aristotle) and its assumption of female subordination and inferiority. Both are now seen as natural. Thus is founded the basis of all patriarchal ideology.

One of the essays in *Women's Property* also deals with myth and religion, M. Saliou's "The Processes of Women's Subordination in Primitive and Archaic Greece." Its purpose is to demonstrate sexual conflict over power between men and women from the Bronze Age to the Classical period. In order to argue this thesis, Saliou interprets a series of myths and even tragedies in a supremely literal manner, ignoring alternative interpretations and complexities. The essay is the least successful in the collection, being schematic, confused, and poorly documented. Indeed, the difference in quality of research and in presentation between the French and English contributions to this volume is striking. It is a pity the former were not subjected to more rigorous editorial scrutiny.

Here it might be possible to take up Lerner's challenge and test her hypotheses against the example of women in ancient Greece. While the Greeks are not entirely absent from *The Creation of Patriarchy*, they are not

its focus, though surely they too transmitted the "major gender symbols and metaphors of Western civilization."(11) Lerner discusses Greek society as pictured in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in her chapter on the woman slave. On the whole, her analysis is excellent, though she is not correct in dating the society to 1200 B.C. Rather, it represents life in the tenth or ninth centuries B.C., in what is often called the Dark Age. This date and the historicity of the contents of the poems, and so their use as an historical source, derive from the work of M. I. Finley.[5] Using comparative analysis, based on the work of modern anthropologists, Finley saw in the poems a coherent social system, with recognizable patterns of behaviour. It has been called a "semi-state,"[6] for in it governmental structures are rudimentary, relations are personal, and leadership positions assumed by the heads of aristocratic lineages. Law-codes, money, and writing are all absent. Moreover, there is no indication of private property.

In this society, Lerner has discerned "unbridled male power."(97) Indeed, both poems reveal a society that is thoroughly patriarchal, with a developed division of labour between the sexes and the subordination of the wife to her husband's authority. Women are also excluded from participation in public decision-making, which is strictly a male prerogative: they have no power. Odysseus's queen, Penelope, for example, remains in his palace working the loom and supervising slaves. Her role is reproductive. She is also expected to exhibit fidelity to a husband who has been absent for twenty years. Her loyalty has become proverbial. But on his return she might also have been expected to tolerate a concubine, the prize of war, or the rivalry of female slaves, who were routinely used for sexual purposes. As a result, bastard children were not uncommon. Patriarchal ideology also flourished, viewing women as fickle, weak, and untrustworthy. Homer's picture, in other words, confirms Lerner's argument that male domination precedes private property and the state. The labour of Odysseus's many female slaves also increases his capacity to offer hospitality, to provide feasts, and to give lavish gifts, thus enhancing his prestige. In time these advantages must increase the inequality already evident between his lineage and others.

On the question of slavery itself, Lerner has misread the Greek sources. It is true that the first slaves were predominantly females and children. In the Homeric poems, they are the booty of war and raids, in which females are raped and males put to death. Such women then enter their captors' household, where they constitute a female work force. This picture of life in the Dark Age ought not, however, to be simply extended to the Classical period in the fifth century B.C., for by then slavery had been transformed and it was no longer the case that women alone were taken as slaves and men put

[5]M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London 1978).

[6]W.G. Runciman, "Origins of States: The Case of Archaic Greece," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24 (1982), 351-77.

to death in war. The examples Lerner provides from Thucydides are correct in themselves but represent an extreme punishment — the wiping out of a city. Normally, males were taken prisoner and later ransomed. At times, and this is especially the case with non-Greeks, they were enslaved. Lerner's emphasis conceals the fact that the fifth century saw the beginning in Athens of a slave system on a par with that in Rome or in the Americas.[7] Slaves entered the market in hordes after the Persian Wars, finding their way into the non-agricultural, non-traditional sectors of the Athenian economy, in building, mining, or banking, for example. This qualitative change in the slave system, and with it a developed class structure, had repercussions for female slaves. Women and children were no longer assimilated to the family and kinship structure. In a much narrower, virtually nuclear, patriarchal household, concubinage and bastardy were shunned. In any case, they no longer afforded an entry into the ranks of the dominant class, as laws now clearly separated free from slave. Here then is a point where Lerner might have investigated he role of female slaves as reproducers in the slave family and their structural position as prostitutes in the officially sanctioned brothels of Athens. Such institutions in turn have implications for the women of the dominant class. Unfortunately, Lerner has ignored these issues.

Lerner, has, however, hit the mark in her picture of class society, which is remarkably similar in Mesopotamia and Classical Athens. In the latter, women were also divided into three groups, wife, concubine, and prostitute, each with her own sphere. Veils were worn by respectable women, while laws controlled behaviour in certain areas that were once private. Adultery, for instance, was a public concern. By law, a woman found guilty of adultery first faced divorce from her husband and then exclusion from certain public areas of religious significance on pain of physical punishment at the hands of bystanders. She was a kind of outcast. This division between respectable and non-respectable women was heightened by the presence of slave and alien women. It also intensified the confinement of upper and middle class Athenian women to their homes. Such women lived indoors among their slaves, forced, as supervisors, into close association with the latter and responsible for their control and punishment within the household. They also lived off the proceeds of slaves, usually male, who worked in the fields or who went out to work and contributed their income to the household. In fact, even the poorest Athenians, whose actual ownership of slaves was minimal, lived indirectly, as a group, off the social surplus produced by slaves.[8] For membership in the dominant class entitled them to a share in the payments, distributions, and amenities of the city not available to outsiders. In a society

[7]M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York 1980).

[8]G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca 1981).

like this, where class lines were apparent and hostility between free and slave open, and openly discussed, there is no possibility of confusing class and gender. Athenian women, while distinct from men in their lack of power and opportunities for personal and intellectual development, had themselves, as wives and daughters, access to the labour-power and the surplus product of slaves.[9]

Other points are more worrisome. For example, the use of laws to the exclusion of other sources for Mesopotamian life leads to a very formal picture. My own work in ancient Greece indicates that there laws and life differed. They also differed, significantly, in ancient Rome, where a depressing legal picture is belied by actual family practice. I suspect that this might be the case in Mesopotamia as well. My second concern is that Lerner's developmental hypothesis has produced a continuum that is all too neat. Even in the material on the Greeks used in argument here, there are vast discontinuities. The Bronze Age, Homeric society, and Classical Athens are separated by periods for which there is little evidence, certainly no written evidence. Thus it is impossible to delineate a continuous development of the patriarchy in Greece. Again I suspect that Lerner's data, stretching over several millennia, may not allow the kind of unilinear development that emerges from her argument.

Both these books contribute to the ongoing debate about male dominance and about class and gender. It is a debate that is still in flux. Lerner especially has made an exceptional contribution both in the accessibility of her ideas, conveniently set forth in many summaries and in a useful appendix of definitions of feminist terms, and in the ideas themselves, which lay the groundwork for a feminist theory of history. It is up to the specialists in Mesopotamian History and Assyriology to indicate how accurate she has been in the use she has made of the data from their fields and in the conclusions she has drawn from them. No one can deny, however, that she has raised the level of debate. For in the end she succeeds in offering us a significant and holistic theoretical framework.

[9]Coontz and Henderson, *Women's Work, Men's Property*, pp. 148-54, discuss the effect of the centralizing state on women in Greece with some insight.