

# Rethinking the Second Wave

NANCY MACLEAN

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## **FIREWEED: A Political Autobiography.**

By Gerda Lerner. Temple. 377 pp. \$34.50.

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A few years ago, an intellectual historian uncovered the story of Betty Friedan's formative years as a Popular Front journalist and activist in the 1940s. Daniel Horowitz wrote with admiration, believing he was deepening the story of "second wave" feminism by restoring its radical roots. Friedan

balked. She refused him permission to quote her unpublished papers, mocked his claims and intimidated a lawsuit. "Annoyed," she even countered with a memoir of her own that acknowledged her connection to the left milieu around the Communist Party and to the radical labor movement but denied that the connection mattered

much to her later feminism.

Not so Gerda Lerner. This leading historian, who virtually created the field of women's history, is now, in her 80s, boldly embracing her radical past. "Whatever contributions as a feminist theoretician and thinker I have been able to make," Lerner announces in this haunting memoir, "derive from my life experience, including my life as a Communist, my experience of persecution and, above all, my life as a grassroots organizer." Where Friedan, a journalist, saw danger in exposing the past, Lerner, a historian, sees value in it. "I do not want to end my life within a closet of my own making," she says. In speaking so forthrightly about her life, Lerner helps rewrite the history of

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second-wave feminism to honor its ties to antifascist, left-wing, labor and antiracist activism prior to the 1960s.

Less famous than Friedan, Lerner may nonetheless leave the more lasting imprint on intellectual life. She has been a pioneer in the field of women's history since she taught the first-known college women's-history course in the United States, in 1963. Since then, she has become a leading emissary from the academy to the public, a precocious public intellectual. The combined sales of her dozen books go well into the hundreds of thousands. She wrote about the struggles of working-class "mill girls" before the new labor history got started. She published one of the first major works of black women's history in 1972, when most white intellectuals had no clue there was such a history and when black nationalist preoccupation with "black manhood" was silencing black women's concerns. As others picked up the baton in these areas, Lerner moved back in time. Defying the pressure in American academic life toward narrow specialization, she trained herself in ancient history and carried out a monumental research project to discover the origins of patriarchy. Then she documented the rise of feminist consciousness over 1,300 years, in order to show what women needed to challenge male supremacy and why it took so long.

Never the ivory-tower type, Lerner from the outset tied research to activism and institution-building. Indeed, her influence comes as much from that institution-building and public speaking as from her writing. Convinced that knowledge of their history was the key to women's emancipation, she worked to reshape the profession as well as the wider world. In 1972 she established the first MA program in women's history at Sarah Lawrence College. Eight years later, she created the first PhD program in women's history at the University of Wisconsin (full disclosure: I earned my degree from this program, but Lerner was not my dissertation director). Lerner also led in establishing Women's History Month, organizing the nation's archives to collect sources about women, advising colleges and universities on how to improve the status of women, and more. This year, her talent for engaging a broad audience was honored with the Bruce Catton Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Historical Writing from the Society of American Historians, while the Organization of American Historians recognized her "intense work in

community organizations and her brilliant scholarship" with a Distinguished Service Award.

Before all that, though, Lerner lived a very different life, and that is her focus in *Fireweed*. She was born Gerda Kronstein in 1920 in Vienna to well-off but poorly matched parents, whose fighting marked her as much as their gifts. A Jew in a Catholic country that turned fascist in the 1930s, as a teenager she joined the underground resistance. Jailed as a high school

*The creation myth that second-wave feminism arose among apolitical, middle-class, white suburban women obscures much of the truth.*

student, she won release the day before the university qualifying exam and passed it with distinction. Yet it would be twenty years before Lerner could attend college. In that time, she escaped alone to the United States in April 1939. She married badly to get into the country under the strict immigration-quota system. She soon divorced and took up a string of typical low-wage women's jobs to make ends meet. She remarried, for love, the Hollywood film editor Carl Lerner, later blacklisted. She wrote and published fiction in a new language. She found herself an orphan, cut off from those family members who survived the Holocaust.

Seeing in the American left a logical extension of her antifascist commitment, she became in the 1940s and '50s a radical activist and Communist Party member. Only at 38 did she finally return to school. In this brave and probing memoir, Lerner interweaves the personal, the social, the political and the intellectual to show how all these experiences shaped her. At a time when the shelves of bookstores sag with the "memoirs" of Americans still in their 30s, Lerner's account demonstrates the value of ripening: the wisdom gained through decades of challenge and contemplation. This is an exciting read about an intriguing life, narrated in vivid prose. The book also provides an opportunity to rethink the roots and prospects of modern feminism, itself so pivotal to intellectual innovation and activism alike in the past few decades. If read as widely as it should be, Lerner's story will shake up the popular understanding of these developments, which is still far afield from what actually happened.

There is, first of all, the matter of labels. Born in a decade when first-wave feminism was said to have died, Lerner con-

found the categories used to tell the story of its successor. Though committed to using all the resources of law and democratic governance to win women equal rights as full citizens, she is not a liberal feminist. Though convinced that the material conditions of everyday life and the relationships between classes have for millennia shaped relations between the sexes, she is not a Marxist feminist. Though her scholarship on the ancient world argues that men's appropriation of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity ushered in the earliest social hierarchy, she is not a radical feminist or a cultural feminist. Though she produced an early, groundbreaking history of black wom-

en, she is not a feminist of color or a womanist. In short, this founder of the field cannot find a place in the framework most women's history courses use to teach the movement.

And that's only the start of the challenge her story poses to the conventional wisdom. It's easiest to show this with reference to Friedan, whose 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, did so much to establish an image now widely understood as Truth: that second-wave feminism arose among apolitical middle-class white women trapped in the suburbs. This creation myth all but obliterates the movement's ties to trade-union women, left-wing activism and post-war struggles for racial equality. Even if unintentional, the erasure proved decisive because anti-Communism had helped to wipe out public memory of this organizing and silence the participants. In that Friedan's portrayal also encouraged many to see women's story as the record of what men did to them, it also encouraged an unfortunate, even dangerous, way of thinking about women: as victims, even dupes, of male power. Friedan had not meant to present a theory of women's history, and her work was a brilliant indictment of the misogyny of mainstream American culture in the 1950s; like all icons, though, it came to stand for more than its creator intended.

For Lerner, the situation was never as simple as popular readings of Friedan (and Simone de Beauvoir, for that matter) implied. Women were not just dominated by men, they were agents: thinking actors and daily shapers of the world that held them down. Lerner knew from observing her own mother, Ili, that the melodrama of women's victimization and men's cruelty failed to capture the reality of complex negotiation. A bohemian aspiring artist married to a kind and hon-

orable but unexciting (and mother-bound) pharmacist, this captivating, profoundly self-absorbed woman alternately lacerated and charmed her daughter. Ili showed that there was nothing natural or inevitable about good mothering: she so faltered in the role that Gerda nearly starved as an infant from inadequate breast-feeding. It would be hard to say who got the worst in Ili's marriage to Robert Kronstein, but certainly he was the more generous and long-suffering of the two.

The tension Gerda witnessed in her parents' marriage—a woman at once held back by convention and innovative in escaping it, yet not as a Carol Gilligan-esque goody-goody—brought depth and complexity to her later scholarship. “What I learned about politics,” Lerner comments wryly, “I learned at home.” Illustrating for her child that life could be a creative project, Ili became a model in spite of her limited interest in motherhood. As Ili turned to painting to transcend her dissatisfactions, her daughter turned to ideas. Like the African-American Communists of the same era, whose resourceful blending of Marxism and Southern black culture the historian Robin D.G. Kelley has recovered, women like Lerner were drawn to the left by their own needs and values, and in turn used the resources they found there to address their own issues. No wonder Lerner's first book was a biography of Sarah and Angelina Grimké, two antebellum South Carolinians. In writing about these privileged daughters of an elite white family, who took from ideas (in their case Quakerism and abolitionism) the courage to fight racism, who in that fight became exiles from the land of their birth and who through that fight came to feminism and a new world view, Lerner was telling a familiar story.

In *Fireweed*, Lerner makes the contribution of left-wing activism central to her feminism: It was leftism that led her to feminism, she says, and an interior dialogue with the left—even as she moved away from the CP and into new endeavors—that prompted her best thinking. Where being a Jew in a Catholic country turned violently anti-Semitic made race a lifetime concern for Lerner, being a Red—to say nothing of a low-wage immigrant worker—got her thinking about class, about organizing and about the emancipatory power of radical ideas. Indeed, her life illustrates how activism can generate intellectual innovation. She was a rank-and-file member and later leader of the postwar Congress of American Women (CAW), a left-led yet broad-based group. When a 1949 House Un-American Activities Committee investiga-

tion killed CAW, Lerner burned all her records of the group to protect herself and her allies. This act taught the later historian the difference between lived history and its documentation in archives, for she herself had “helped to destroy memory”: She knew firsthand how the anti-Communism of American culture led to the discounting of radicals' contributions to progressive social change.

More positively, involvement in CAW taught her that women's organizing work was vital to the well-being of communities, if nowhere recognized in the history books of the time. She entered the academy knowing that significant stories were not being told and made it her mission to see that they were. Similarly, she respected black women as thinkers and community-builders because she had learned from her African-American activist peers. “I found them because I knew they would be there,” she writes of the women whose work she collected in the path-breaking *Black Women in White America*—at a time when seasoned scholars of black history told her no such documents existed. Her career illustrates that justice is not the only reason diversity is so important to higher education. When the excluded gain access, they bring with them what could not be seen before: They alter knowledge.

Even on *The Feminine Mystique*'s home ground of the postwar suburbs, Lerner tells a very different story—which is encouraging, because now more Americans live in suburban communities than in cities and rural areas combined. She actually makes the suburbs interesting. Levittown appears as a site for Communist house meetings and the PTA as a hub of radical political work. She and Carl only became suburbanites, it must be said, after the anti-Communist blacklist drove him from Hollywood in 1949 in search of work. Trying to evade the ever-prying FBI, they moved to a quiet part of Queens, New York. There Lerner encountered not what Friedan called “the comfortable concentration camp,” but the best activism of her life time. Working with black neighbors, she organized to try to stop white flight. She canvassed door-to-door with a child on each hip to campaign for Henry Wallace for President, against nuclear weapons and for peace. She helped build a PTA chapter that celebrated diversity and organized interracial childcare and cooperative house-keeping groups that rotated domestic labor. “We spent all our days in the company of small children and felt we needed a few

hours off each week in order to survive," Lerner recalls. Two mornings to oneself "seemed like freedom." It was also precious time to write and to organize. Lerner co-created a left-wing writers' collective, for example, and supported an underground performance network of blacklisted artists. Interestingly, Friedan was engaged in similar activism in another part of suburban Queens, according to biographer Horowitz. The difference is in how Lerner values this collective action as a source of learning. Whereas to Friedan women's volunteer work came to seem a distraction from the remunerative careers they should have been building, to Lerner such work appeared as a life force for community well-being and social progress—and for women's own transcendence of sexist thinking. This creative labor was denied its due in social analysis not because it lacked intrinsic value but because women were excluded from the academy and the life of the mind.

Lerner's memoir may well help to "mainstream" a rich vein of revisionist historical writing on the years from 1946 to 1960. Such scholars as Dorothy Sue Cobble, Dennis Deslippe, Nancy Gabin, Daniel Horowitz, Joanne Meyerowitz, Amy Swerdlow and Kate Weigand have

shown the 1950s—contrary to stereotype—to be a time of lush and formative, if embattled, female activism. This was true not only in the black freedom movement, which has always been the glaring contradiction to the notion that progressive politics died between the war and the 1960s. The harsh toll of McCarthyism notwithstanding, in labor unions like the United Automobile Workers (UAW) and the United Electrical Workers (UE), in such community organizations as CAW and Women's Strike for Peace, and on the left more generally, women were working together for shared goals and questioning an ideology that denigrated them.

CAW's motto caught the spirit: "10 Women Anywhere Can Start Anything." Friedan herself publicized some of this organizing in "UE Fights for Women Workers" (1952). Striking for demands that would seem radical even today (such as bigger wage increases for women to reduce the wage gap), UE activists also pushed men to share housework and urged government support for maternity benefits and childcare. Renegades grouped around Mary Inman pushed the Communist Party to cut the cheesecake pictures of women in its press and to recognize housewives as exploited workers whose problems demanded

serious attention. In short, in many arenas, progressive women gained organizing experience, built networks of communication, fashioned new visions of possibility and acquired some power in the 1950s. They prepared the way for a movement that in the next decade would appear to most people as a spontaneous combustion. "If there had not been a few people like us doing the kinds of things that we have done," Dorothy Haener, a UAW activist then and later co-founder of NOW, has said, "much of what we have seen happen in the women's movement might well not have happened."

Yet if Lerner's 1950s differ from the image so many readers conjured from *The Feminine Mystique*, they also jar the story told by the younger generation of women's liberationists, who defined themselves against the older feminists they saw as irredeemably "liberal," obsessed with equality in the public world to the exclusion of the private and subjective. The youthful activists believed cultural radicalism and personal politics, as they called it, to be their distinctive creation. Not so, Lerner shows: Their radical forebears were undermining orthodoxy even as they appeared to be living it. When

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Gerda married (twice), it was to men she knew first as comrades and friends. She and Carl Lerner built a lifetime partnership on shared values and common projects: It fused politics with artistic collaboration, mutual support, good sex (she implies; modesty on this front is perhaps the most notable generational difference that shows) and shared desire to raise children better and more honestly than their parents had. Their commitment, in turn, flourished within a left-wing counterculture: a network of like-minded activists and artists who rehearsed in practical cooperative endeavors for the new world they envisioned. The New Left may have invented a name for such efforts—"prefigurative politics"—but not the practice.

Given the different choices the two leaders have made, it's no wonder that among Betty Friedan's papers is to be found a 1963 letter from Lerner. Then a college student who wrote in the evenings after her children were in bed, Lerner applauded Friedan for her "splendid book." She expressed "one reservation," though: that Friedan's sole concern was "the problems of middle-class, college-educated women." Why not pay attention also to "working women, especially Negro women" and "the more pressing disadvantages" they faced? Such women could be natural organizers for a movement that would benefit all women. "By their desperate need, by their numbers, by their organizational experience (if trade union members)," she pointed out, "working women are most important in reaching institutional solutions to the problems of women." Where Friedan chose to burn bridges—first to a past of radical unionism and interracial organizing; later to sexual politics, as she warned of "the lavender menace" in NOW and tried to push lesbians from leadership positions; and even to the true complexity of the suburban world in which she honed her thinking—Lerner worked to build them, sometimes stumbling, to be sure, but trying.

Lerner announces at the outset of *Fireweed* that the autobiographer can "strive for truth without having the illusion that one can find it." In the end, her story gains poignancy from where it falters. The depiction of her contacts with family members in the war years is one such area. Lerner was the only member of her household to immigrate to the United States. Her immediate family escaped the Nazis; eighteen other relatives lost their lives in the Holocaust. Lerner suffers the most from what hap-

pened with her mother, Ili. In May 1940, Ili, then living as a painter on the French Riviera, was detained in a camp with thousands of others who lacked French citizenship, including Hannah Arendt. Once freed in summer 1940, Ili begged Gerda repeatedly for help in escaping the nightmare engulfing Europe. Gerda tried very hard to get Ili in under the quota system. Yet at a crisis point in the situation of a mother who had always, always put her own desires first, even leaving her teenage daughters behind

*If Lerner's 1950s differ from those offered up by Friedan, they also jar the story told by the younger generation of women's liberationists.*

as fascism swept Europe to move to another country to paint, the daughter now made her own "decisive turning—toward selfishness." Gerda eloped to Reno for a few weeks with the man who was to be her life partner, rather than remain on the East Coast to press her mother's probably futile claims. (In the end, Ili managed to get to Liechtenstein, where her estranged husband and younger daughter, Nora, were living; she died after the war without seeing Gerda again.)

This is clearly the most painful and protracted trauma of Lerner's life, and the hardest for her to interpret. "The strands of it keep escaping me," she confesses at one point. Still, skilled historian that she is, she shares the correspondence with readers and uses her ghosts to illustrate the larger truth of how "our unfinished business with the dead continues for the rest of our lives." Sorting through the traces of the past to find meaning and direction, the living consume the dead, as she puts it: We take them in "as material out of which we make our own life." Dialogue with the past is inescapable, she suggests; it defines identity.

Lerner's account of her commitment to the Communist Party, similarly insightful, also wavers at points. She is unflinching in exposing the mental habits and emotional needs that for so long kept her in "complicity in studied ignorance" of the horrors of Stalinism. Her description of moments of recognition and her quick suppression of them will ring true to anyone who has ever accepted wrong in an institution she believed in and relied on. For these, Lerner expresses shame free of chest-beating. Yet, intellectually, her treatment is less full and satisfying than it might be, because she understates the distinctiveness of Communist politics. Granted, she became involved

in the Popular Front era when the party reached out for common ground with liberals. Granted too that she, like most others, joined because party members stood out as the best fighters for social justice, a fact that rightly gives her pride. Indeed, at a time when Communism draws such disdain across the political spectrum, the book offers a salutary reminder of just how much Communists advanced racial equality, workers' rights, women's liberation, civil liberties and cultural innovation in the

United States. The party did, as she hoped it would, make the country a much better place. Her commitment to it came from how she extended her antifascism to a larger vision

of social justice that Communists promoted most boldly and effectively. And she saw little contradiction between her faith in socialism and her devotion to American democracy, which, as a refugee from authoritarianism, she valued more dearly than many native-born radicals. Still, her claim that she was never a revolutionary and always sought change by constitutional means is unconvincing—and makes one question why Lerner, so long so daring and courageous, downplays her radicalism here.

Here, as elsewhere, this gripping memoir is sure to attract biographers to its subject before long. By making her papers available to researchers at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, Lerner has made their task easier. In the meantime, she has given women's history and feminism a deeper, richer genesis. This book explodes the myth that the modern women's movement was from the outset all white and middle class, oblivious to race and unconcerned with class. As Lerner shows, radicals were there from the start, taking risks in practice and providing concepts that linked varied causes for mutual benefit.

In this dispiriting time for believers in a more just world, all readers are likely to appreciate the angle from which this story is told. Rather than focusing on her later achievements, Lerner shares here, instead, the "struggles, mistakes, detours and searches for direction." In a brilliant narrative choice, she closes the book in 1958, the lowest point in her life. McCarthyism had ravaged the community that nurtured Lerner in her new land; even her gynecologist, a comrade, named patients to HUAC. She found her faith in socialism then destroyed by Khrushchev's revelations in 1956 of the depravity of Stalinism and by the party's inability—even then—to shake

its grip. That loss came just as her marriage floundered, her teenage children rebelled, she underwent surgery and she and Carl suffered rebuff by civil rights leaders because of their dangerous pasts. Even writing failed her; a soul-shaking block set in. In despair, as Lerner cast about for purpose, she enrolled in a class at the New School for Social Research. That led to a BA and three years after that to a PhD at Columbia and a new life.

For those who, like Lerner, feel themselves to be "misfits" in a world built on hierarchy and run for the profit of the spoiled and smug, this candid book is a generous gift. Lerner takes the title of her memoir from the plant that spreads when fire has so charred an area that it appears all life has expired. Defying the desolation, fireweed's vivid pink flowers replenish the soil to make fresh growth possible, and in time transform the landscape. ■

## FILMS

# Haunted Hermitage

STUART KLAUANS

## RUSSIAN ARK

While going about their business, great artists often make monkeys of the people who write about them. Look at what happened to one chatterer, who not long ago was playing the critic in the *New York Times*. "There are two kinds of tough-minded, morally uncompromising artists in today's

film world," he wrote, "those who want to make musicals and those who don't.... Pre-eminent among the wallflowers is the Russian master Aleksandr Sokurov."

Unknown to this monkey—me—the Russian master had just shot one of the most splendid ballroom scenes in film history. It's the thrilling climax to *Russian Ark*, a movie that has absolutely no precedent, except for *The Scarlet Empress*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Leopard*, *Doctor Zhivago*, the agglomerated screen translations of *War and Peace* and all other costume epics. *Russian Ark* sums up and surpasses these pictures in the sense that it's nothing *but* feathers and pearls and epaulets and gold braid, music and color and figures out of the past. By cutting these things loose from the moorings of a plot—or even a single time period—Sokurov has allowed his sumptuous pleasures to flow freely, purely, without troubling you to remember which archduke is in debt to whose cousin.

But then, being tough-minded and morally uncompromising, Sokurov has also made *Russian Ark* into a haunted meditation on the disasters of history, and on our precarious efforts to rescue something from the flood. The melancholy that has pervaded many of his previous films—*The Stone*, for example, or *Mother and Son*—also seeps delicately through *Russian Ark*. It's as if this picture wanted to hold still and be quiet, even as it launches

into the longest tracking shot ever made.

Imagine a black screen, with no sound except for sparse, quiet, atonal music that sounds like someone's nerves being re-strung in a neighboring galaxy. "I open my eyes and see nothing," says a man's voice in the darkness. "An accident. I can't remember what happened." Then, in a wan light that mutes the colors, figures appear in a small courtyard: women flushed with excitement, young officers laughing and hurrying forward in a light flurry of snow. The voice on the soundtrack remarks on what you've already noted: The costumes belong to the nineteenth century. But what is this place, the voice wants to know? Who are these people? The camera plunges after them, into a doorway, down a dark stair, through a confused hallway and up again, pressing on through the maze like the eye of the ghostlike narrator.

And for the next ninety minutes, this motion will never stop, as the camera eye wanders through what proves to be the State Hermitage Museum. No second camera will add its point of view; no cut will suddenly carry you into a different time or place. *Russian Ark* will turn out to be a single Steadicam shot, threading its way without interruption through dozens of different spaces and lighting conditions, while being threaded through itself by hundreds of choreographed performers. Some are in contemporary dress and some in costumes

of earlier eras. Some represent historical figures (Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Nicholas and Alexandra) or nameless soldiers and aristocrats, while others appear as themselves: Hermitage director Mikhail Piotrovsky, for example, or the artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre, Valery Gergiev.

Considered just as a stunt, this single, feature-length shot is superlative, if not utterly mad. Think of the months of planning and rehearsal it required. Then picture the anxiety-racked day of the shoot: the assistants whispering frantically into their headsets, the grips trying to duck unseen past the camera (there were almost as many grips as credited performers), the heroic Steadicam operator Tilman Büttner carrying on long after his thighs must have turned to lead. Had anything gone visibly wrong in those ninety minutes, the whole movie would have been ruined.

Get beyond your astonishment at the magnitude of this feat and you begin to notice the directorial skill that sustains it. To give only two examples: When Sokurov wants to make a sudden jump in space—an effect that would have been easy to achieve, had he allowed himself any cuts—he cagily has a pair of hands intrude into the frame. You assume you're seeing a close-up of the lead actor's body; but unless I'm mistaken about this Wellesian trick, the hands actually belong to a stand-in. That's how the lead actor can suddenly, magically be standing far away, in a place you've never seen before, when the camera looks up again. Here, Sokurov literally uses sleight of hand. Elsewhere he relies on something like the blocking traditionally practiced by good theater directors. A throng is flowing down the great stair of the Hermitage, carrying along the camera, when a man in the foreground seems to recall that he's left something upstairs. He turns and begins to push his way back up, against the crowd; and so the camera turns, too, to follow him, allowing Sokurov to direct your attention to a different view of the architecture.

But even though it took daring to shoot a film in one take—daring, and awe-inspiring skill—what does the stunt mean? Sokurov has explained that he wanted to insert himself into the flow of time—a comment that strikes me as enigmatic and incomplete because there is more than one flow of time in this movie, or perhaps no flow at all. Since the Hermitage of *Russian Ark* is inhabited by the ghosts of three centuries, time stands still; since the historical period changes as you pass from room to room, time moves unpredictably. Maybe I can rephrase Sokurov's statement: By taking place in real time,