

GERDA LERNER, "Definitions," *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986)

1. hypothesis:

"that it is the relationship of women to history which explains the nature of female subordination, the causes for women's cooperation in the process of their subordination, the conditions for their opposition to it, the rise of feminist consciousness." (vii)

2. Definitions:

"For the time being, paying attention to the words we use and how we use them is a way of taking our thought seriously. Which means, it is an essential beginning ... (toward an understanding of the relationship of women to history)" (233)

"For my purposes three concepts have been particularly difficult to define and properly name:

(1) that concept describing the historical situation of women (233-235)

*oppression of women* is the term commonly used by women writers and thinkers and by feminists. The term "oppression," meaning forceful subordination, has also been used to describe the subject condition of individuals and of groups, as in "class oppression" or "racial oppression." The term inadequately describes paternalistic dominance, which, while it has oppressive aspects, also involves a set of mutual obligations and is frequently not perceived as oppressive.

*subordination of women* has distinct advantages over oppression. "subordination" does not have the connotation of evil intent on the part of the dominant; it allows for the possibility of collusion between him and the subordinate. It includes the possibility of voluntary acceptance of subordinate status in exchange for protection and privilege, a condition which characterizes so much of the historical experience of women.

*deprivation* has the advantage of being objective, but it has the disadvantage of masking and hiding the existence of power relations

KEY: when one conceptualizes women as being central, not marginal, to the history of humankind, it becomes obvious that all three words describe women at some period of history and in some places or groups. It is also obvious that each word is appropriate to specific aspects of women's status at a given time or place.

(2) that concept describing various forms of women's autonomous strivings [and discontent] (236-237)

*feminism*: the term commonly and quite indiscriminately used.

KEY: the problem is that there are 2 different *levels* of consciousness and activity:

*woman's rights* movement means a movement concerned with winning for women equality with men in all aspects of society and giving them access to all rights and opportunities enjoyed by men in the institutions of society

*woman's emancipation* means freedom from oppressive restrictions imposed by sex; self-determination; and autonomy

KEY: need to distinguish between woman's rights feminism and woman's emancipation feminism: while they are clearly related, there is a difference in the perception of the problem and the vision of the future

(3) that concept describing the goal of women's strivings (237)

*woman's liberation*: the commonly used term which, as with "oppression," conjures up political liberation movements of other groups. It implies victimization and a subjective consciousness in a group striving to correct a wrong. While the latter concept certainly needs to be included in any adequate definition, the former should be avoided.

(4) What are women? (238)

Women are a *sex*.

*Gender* is the cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles.

*Sex-gender system* refers to the institutionalized system which allots resources, property, and privileges to persons according to culturally defined gender roles.

(5) What word describes the system under which women have lived since the dawn of civilization and are living now (238-239)

The problem with the word *patriarchy*, which most feminists use, is that it has a narrow, traditional meaning: the system, historically derived from Greek and Roman law, in which the male head of the household had absolute legal and economic power over his dependent female and male family members. This usage distorts historical reality: the patriarchal dominance of male family heads over their kin is much older than classical antiquity; and in the 19th c., male dominance in the family simply took new forms and was not ended.

*Patriarchy* in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.

If patriarchy describes the institutionalized system of male dominance, paternalism describes a particular mode, a subset of patriarchal relations.

*Paternalism* or *paternalistic dominance* describes the relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights. In its historical origins, the concept comes from family relations as they developed under patriarchy, in which the father held absolute power over all the members of his household. In exchange, he owed them the obligation of economic support and protection. As applied to familial relations, it should be noted that responsibilities and obligations are not equally distributed among those to be protected: the male children's subordination to the father's dominance is temporary; it lasts until they themselves become heads of households. The subordination of female children and of wives is lifelong. Daughters can escape it only if they place themselves as wives under the dominance/protection of another man.

*Sexism* defines the ideology of male supremacy, of male superiority and of beliefs that support and sustain it. Sexism and patriarchy mutually reinforce one another. Clearly, sexism can exist in societies where institutionalized patriarchy has been abolished. (240-241)

(6) the ground out of which feminist movements develop (242)

*Woman's culture*: the ground upon which women stand in their resistance to patriarchal domination and their assertion of their own creativity in shaping society. The term implies an assertion of equality and an awareness of sisterhood.

When historical conditions are right and women have both the social space and the social experience in which to ground their new understanding, feminist consciousness develops.

Historically, this takes place in distinct stages:

1. the awareness of a wrong
2. the development of a sense of sisterhood
3. the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition
4. the development of an alternate vision of the future