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from North Carolina

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**A conversation with Gerda Lerner**

Author of *Living with History / Making Social Change*

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**Q: Tell me about the title of this collection, *Living with History / Making Social Change*. How does the title unify the theme of these essays?**

**A:** The title indicates the two themes of this book: *Living with History*—encompasses my location in time and space; the way history has been a determining factor of my life; my work as a practicing historian and my work as a pioneer of women’s history; my theoretical work and my thinking about history. *Making Social Change*—deals with my organizational work in the history profession, on behalf of advancing the status of women historians and in making the historical organizations more democratic and open to new emerging fields; my outreach work in bringing women’s history into the community and into every aspect of the educational system; my work in helping to advance Women’s Studies nationally and internationally.

The unifying theme of this book is to show how the two aspects of my work developed and enriched each other.

**Q: Your accomplishments as a historian and social and political thinker are legendary. I’m intrigued by the fact that you began your higher education while in your 40s, and then earned both your M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in three years of graduate study. How did you achieve so much in such a short period of time? What qualities, in your opinion, have made you so prolific and productive throughout your career?**

**A:** I was able to earn my M.A. and Ph.D. in three years at Columbia University, taking a full program of courses plus teaching at Long Island University during the last of the three years, because I had finished all the research on my dissertation before I entered graduate school. Since I was already a published writer, the writing of the dissertation was not that difficult for me. I was also totally dedicated to this project and gave up all other activities during those years.

My productivity as a writer is due to a number of factors: first, my passion for the work I was doing and my conviction that it was important to others; then, my habit of discipline. Finally, it was also due to the support I received from the university and from various granting agencies

[more]

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## 2-2-2 Living with History / Making Social Change

that permitted me to teach only one semester each year and devote the rest of the year to research and writing.

**Q: Why, in your opinion, do some dissertations become excellent, compelling books while others are destined to be read by only a handful of academics?**

**A:** The reason some dissertations become compelling books is that the writers and/or their advisers paid attention to the literary quality of the work. Unfortunately, current graduate training seldom offers that. Most historians either think it is not their job to teach students writing skills or feel unqualified to do so. Many dissertations are written as though they were a series of separate essays or reports assembled in book form. But a book is a whole and must function as a whole. I believe proper graduate training in history should combine rigorous training in documentation and verification with some attention to literary skills. I have written about this question in my book.

**Q: As a founder of Women's History Month, what do you think of the controversy surrounding African American History Month—that it's outdated? Is there a similar discussion surrounding Women's History Month?**

**A:** I'm not familiar with that controversy. I certainly don't believe that Women's History Month is "outdated"; on the contrary, it needs to be maintained and enlarged to include every group and class of women.

**Q: Why did you choose to publish this collection with UNC Press?**

**A:** I respect the record of UNC Press, and I have great respect for Kate Torrey as an editor.

**Q: What do you think of the book's jacket design? Does the illustration, Nora Kronstein's "Abstract Composition," hold special meaning for you?**

**A:** I love the current jacket. The artist Nora Kronstein is my sister and a successful professional artist in Israel. To have her work appear together with my work gives me great joy.

**Q: What are you reading now?**

**A:** *Journey of the Heart* by Elizabeth Bartlett, the story of a heart transplant and a spiritual journey. Also, I'm re-reading *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

**Q: I found the last essay in the book, "Reflections on Aging," particularly moving. What needs to be done to make aging easier?**

**A:** Here are my recommendations:

- Respect old people, don't patronize and protect them.
- Assure them of the financial security in old age to which their lives' contributions entitle them.

[more]

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### 3-3-3 Living with History / Making Social Change

- Fight to restore pensions and maintain Social Security.
- Improve the transportation system, so that streetcars, buses and railroads are easily accessible to old people and reasonably priced.
- Think of aging as a natural part of life, not as a burden and a disease.
- Value the life experience and wisdom of old people and let them be part of the community as long as possible.
- Let them teach you how to adapt and how to accept help gracefully.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Gerda Lerner, author of *Living with History / Making Social Change* (University of North Carolina Press, Spring 2009). The text of this interview is available at [www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/lerner/](http://www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/lerner/).

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