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A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER BUFFETT: THE POWER OF PHILANTHROPY TO TRANSFORM CULTURES

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract:

IJPS Editor-in-Chief Riane Eisler talks with Jennifer Buffett, co-president of the NoVo Foundation, about her ideas, her life, and the role of philanthropy in the cultural transformation toward partnership.

Keywords: NoVo Foundation, cultural transformation, Social Wealth Economic Indicators, caregiving, violence against women, partnership, social movements, philanthropy

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Riane Eisler: Thank you so much, Jennifer, for your willingness to be part of this third issue of *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*. I want to start by congratulating you on your pioneering philanthropic work and the many well-deserved honors you have received in recognition of your leadership, especially for your work through the NoVo Foundation, which you created together with your husband, Peter Buffett. The NoVo Foundation's mission statement states that it is dedicated to catalyzing a transformation in global society, moving from a culture of domination and exploitation to one of collaboration and partnership. How did you decide to use this cultural transformation framework and language to guide your mission?

Jennifer Buffett: When we first created the NoVo Foundation in 2006, we challenged ourselves to take a hard look at the world, and we spent time traveling in the field, meeting in depth with grantees, reading, and reflecting, so that we could establish a common vision and language. We wanted a guide for our thinking and for the work we

would support. We knew from the start that we wanted to address root causes and to understand the overarching narratives and historical forces that have been at work for generations, including colonialism, empire expansion, patriarchy, racism, and economic enslavement. Even if naming these forces could be unpleasant, we believed it was essential to do so explicitly, and we still believe that today.

We realized we cannot know where we are going until we know where we come from. We saw that disconnection, domination, and exploitation lay at the core of so many of the world's problems, and we felt it was important to be very clear about how we saw the world, and the changes we were working toward, in order to help catalyze awareness and change.

Eisler: Funding for “women’s issues” is still a small percentage of philanthropy. NoVo focuses on empowering girls and women as foundational to a better world. You have been a pioneer in changing this marginalization of half of humanity and of anything considered “soft” or “feminine.” What in your personal life and experiences led you in this direction?

Buffett: I experienced subtle and not-so-subtle gender inequity my entire life, especially as the twin of a brother. Yet I did not truly understand and was not fully conscious of that experience until later in adulthood. I was a sensitive kid and more inclined to quiet, artistic endeavors. I felt like I was encouraged to take on chores and care-taking responsibilities. However, I got the message quite early that these would not make money, and therefore did not hold “real value.”

Then I fell into a supportive role early on in my marriage, taking care of a wide array of things in our life so that my husband could focus on his music career. But even though I was working around the clock, I somehow felt like I wasn't *really* working, or recognized as such, because I wasn't in the workplace *working for someone else*.

As Peter and I matured, we both saw the devastating results of the imbalances between the genders (and in our marriage) and between what is valued and compensated as work and what is not.

I also saw the vulnerability in women and girls around me. I saw my mother's vulnerability as a mother of four children—especially after she and my father divorced. Her earning power would never match my father's or most men's. I saw the vulnerability in my female friends who wanted to maintain careers and also care—or just care—for children. We know that being a single mother in this country is one of the biggest indicators of poverty.

When I began working in philanthropy, I visited teenage girls in postwar Rwanda who were completely relied upon to keep orphaned children and the elderly alive, to keep all aspects of life going in their villages. Yet they were invisible to aid and support. I also sat with teen girls in Milwaukee and New York who felt completely invisible, exploited and hopeless. They felt vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence; they suffered neglect; and they were grossly undervalued and under-served. All of these experiences, and more, led me in the direction of championing and prioritizing girls' and women's rights through the NoVo Foundation.

Eisler: As you know, women comprise 70% of the world's poor. Even in the wealthy U.S., according to the last *Shriver Report*, one-third of women live in poverty or on its brink. A big factor in this disproportionate female poverty is that women perform most of the work of caregiving for low wages in workplaces and for free in homes. What can women leaders such as you do to change the devaluation of this “women's work” and its tragic consequences for women and children?

Buffett: There are very few examples in history in which a segment of society was suddenly “given” their just due, and valued for what they bring without demanding it.

So, first, I think we need to address the myths and confusion we as women have about care being *optional*, or something that simply takes care of itself in the background. This attitude and practice have hurt women and families long enough. We need to confront this issue, both within ourselves and with those we can influence—at home, in the workplace, and in our broader communities. This includes recognizing and valuing the need for self-care. If we don't value self-care, how will we value care for others?

All of us must recognize that we have needs to be cared for in loving, nurturing, meaningful, and high-quality ways—and that this work matters and is not in any way shameful or inferior to other forms of work. As leaders we need to believe that we can re-prioritize what gets valued and paid for, and that we have influence to change this — for everyone! It is time for us to stand up, individually and collectively, and demand that caregiving is valued, respected, and compensated fairly, and that work-life balance policies are not fringe ideas but tenets of a sane civilization.

As women leaders we can also educate the boys and men in our lives. We can influence them to understand this issue at deeper, practical levels, and to join us in providing care and in being better caring humans. (If congressmen and congresswomen followed the life of the average under-paid care-giver, I wonder what might change.)

We can also prioritize and fund caregiver advocacy groups such as Caring Across Generations and the Center for Partnership Studies. We can support research studies and policy change, and work wherever subtle and not-so subtle forms of devaluing or undervaluing show up. We need to believe that what we most intimately value *can* be valued in society at large, if we start to believe it, stand up, and don't back down.

Eisler: With support from the NoVo Foundation, the Center for Partnership Studies developed a unique set of metrics, *Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs)*, that show the enormous economic value of the work of caregiving, starting in early childhood. How can we bring these new economic measures to policy makers so they will realize that investing in this work has enormous economic benefits both in the short

run (reducing poverty, crime, etc.) and in the long run (producing the high-quality human capital needed for our knowledge/service age)?

Buffett: These new economic measures hold tremendous power because they take what has always been rendered invisible and make it visible. They explicitly quantify for policymakers—and for everyone—the tremendous financial and social value of caregiving. In the process, they make it much harder to devalue or ignore this work.

But indicators alone are not enough. It's up to us to use our voices to ensure that policy makers are held to account on these issues. We should use the Social Wealth Economic Indicators as a springboard for a national conversation. At a fundamental level, how much do we value the care of our loved ones and ourselves? How can we afford not to? In an election year, we should demand that every policy maker clarify his or her answer to these and many other questions.

Eisler: Violence against girls and women is a global pandemic with disastrous personal, social, and economic consequences, and NoVo has been actively working to change this by empowering girls and women. How can governments more effectively be held accountable for failing to enact and/or enforce laws against these egregious human rights violations?

Buffett: It's a very important question, made even more important by the fact that governments themselves are often the actors committing the violence. Women and girls, in addition to men and boys, are subjected to state violence at alarming levels, yet this often goes unreported.

Ultimately, governments will only be held accountable when the voices of girls and women, and the advocacy organizations that work with them, become too powerful to ignore. We believe very strongly in the power of social movements, and have been deeply inspired by movements like Black Lives Matter, which was founded by three women. It is precisely these kinds of movements, and the grassroots leaders who create

them, that will drive lasting accountability and change. And it's why we support this kind of long-term, bottom-up change in countries throughout the world.

Eisler: What do you see as the most important next steps in moving cultures from domination and exploitation to partnership and care, and what role do you see for yourself in accelerating this cultural transformation?

Buffett: First of all, people need to see very clearly that domination, competition, and exploitation have been at the foundation of all of our systems, including our economy, and that these structures are man-made and are not at all inevitable. We need to be honest about how deeply they have deprived and harmed us all, as well as about our own participation in them.

Once we do that, we can begin to choose differently – more holistically, and in life-affirming and regenerative ways. I think that when people experience caring and supportive environments, they won't settle for less again.

At NoVo we are working to ensure girls' and women's full human rights to well-being, safety, and the ability and possibility to thrive. We want every child to experience safe, supportive environments in which parents, caregivers, teachers, and kids make caring for one another a priority. We believe in local communities coming together around shared needs, talents, values, and resources. We fund groups working to end the domination, oppression, and exploitation they've experienced, and to elevate their own voices and visions for their lives and the systems that shape them.

My role and leadership through NoVo is to make sure that our vision holds true – that we find the best levers and groups poised to help make these kinds of shifts happen, and fund and advocate for them.

Eisler: What message do you have for scholars and practitioners using the resources of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*?

Buffett: I was interested to learn that the field of Partnership Studies was inspired by Albert Einstein’s observation that no problem can be solved by the same kind of thinking that created it. That’s exactly the same view that we bring to our work at the NoVo Foundation, and that inspires the thinking of so many of our partners.

So I hope that scholars and practitioners using the resources of the *IJPS* realize that they are not alone in their work. In fact, they are part of a growing global community of leaders who are looking outside of our current systems for a new kind of thinking and a new kind of being – and in the process, are seeing the chance to create a better and more just world. If we work together, we can accomplish incredible things.

Eisler: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Buffett: I believe very strongly that fundamental change is possible, and that it can start with us. We can be the humans who begin the shift from domination and exploitation toward partnership and collaboration by rediscovering what it really means to be human and to live in our shared humanity. We can find the ways to value care—and one another—over profits and materialism.

Jennifer Buffett is Co-Chair of the NoVo Foundation, a philanthropic organization focused primarily on the empowerment of women and girls. She is responsible for the strategic direction of NoVo and chairs its Grants Committee. She shares leadership of the foundation with her husband, composer and producer Peter Buffett. Among various investments Ms. Buffett has guided at NoVo are a \$30 million, five-year program with the International Rescue Committee to help rebuild education and vocational systems and end violence against women and girls in post-conflict West Africa. NoVo also partners with the Nike Foundation on a \$100 million granting partnership entitled “the girl effect,” which is focused on testing and spreading successful models of economic empowerment for adolescent girls in the developing world. Ms. Buffett’s other efforts at NoVo include capacity building for Women for Women International, a recipient of the Hilton Prize for Humanitarian Organizations that helps women in war-torn countries rebuild their lives and if possible, become leaders in their communities. While the

NoVo Foundation is dedicated to ending violence against girls and women and to the empowerment of girls and women, it also aims to advance social emotional learning (SEL) competencies and practice. SEL increases children's sense of well-being and social and emotional skills, which leads to improved academic performance and a better chance for success in life and relationships.

Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon), is a systems scientist best known as author of *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*; *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century*; *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*; and other books and articles. She is president of the Center for Partnership Studies, and consults with businesses and governments on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. She taught at UCLA and Immaculate Heart College, and currently teaches in the graduate Transformative Leadership Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies and through Center for Partnership Studies webinars. She sits on many boards and councils, including the World Future Council and the Club of Rome. She is founder of the Caring Economy Campaign and co-founder, with Nobel Laureate Betty Williams, of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence. Dr. Eisler has received honors for her work for peace and human rights, including the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation's Distinguished Peace Leadership Award. For more information, please see: www.rianeeisler.com and www.caringeconomy.org

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