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BUILDING A CARING DEMOCRACY: FOUR CORNERSTONES FOR AN INTEGRATED PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

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Abstract

Why do people vote for “strong” leaders who condone violence, debase women, and stoke fear and scapegoating? If free elections alone are not the answer, what will it take to build a caring democracy that promotes the wellbeing and full development of all people? This paper examines these questions from a perspective that takes into account the connection between politics and economics, on one hand, and what children first experience and observe in their family and other intimate relations, on the other. It describes the study of relational dynamics, a multidisciplinary method of analysis that reveals social categories that transcend conventional ones: the partnership system and the domination system. It looks at modern history through the lens of the partnership-domination social scale, focusing on the struggle between the movement toward partnership and regressions to domination. It compares the integrated regressive worldview and political agenda with the fragmented progressive one. It identifies four cornerstones for partnership or domination systems: family/childhood, gender, economics, narratives/language. It then details how to build these cornerstones so they support a more humane, caring, and sustainable future, and provides practical resources for this urgent task.

Keywords: democracy, politics, political agenda, regressives, progressives, domination, partnership, children, gender, narratives, language, economics, caring democracy, values, demagogues, elections, fear, misogyny, human development.

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The conventional view of democracy is that free elections will lead to both freedom and equality. Yet people all too often vote for regressive, violent, and oppressive regimes - from the election of Hitler in Germany and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

to the election of a U.S. President who promised strong-man rule, condoned violence, debased women, and stoked fear and scapegoating.

What can we learn from these lessons from history? What makes people vote for regimes that are cruel and oppressive? If free elections alone are not the answer, what will it take to build a more humane, inclusive, and caring system that promotes the wellbeing and full development of all people, regardless of sex, race, class, and other differences? Is such a caring democracy really possible? If so, what would it look like? And what can we do to create it?

To answer these questions - and to meet our unprecedented economic, social, and environmental challenges - requires new thinking. As Einstein famously observed, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

Yet the vast majority of people, including most national leaders, remain in a kind of trance, insulated by old ways of thinking. Fortunately, a growing number of people recognize that solving our unprecedented problems calls for more than tinkering at the edges of failing systems - that we need whole systems change, and that this, in turn, requires a cultural transformation.

This article outlines key elements of this cultural transformation. It sketches the methodology that led to a new conceptual framework for understanding social systems, its key findings, and their implications for whole systems change. It contrasts the integrated worldview and agenda of those trying to push us back with the more fragmented ones of progressive movements. It then describes long-term actions focusing on four cornerstones that are foundations for a caring democracy: family/childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and narratives/language.

FROM OLD TO NEW THINKING AND LANGUAGE

Beyond Old Social Categories and Analyses

New thinking requires new language. Linguistic psychologists have shown that the categories we are taught channel our thinking (Ornstein, 1972).

Traditional social categories - such as ancient vs. modern, Eastern vs. Western, leftist vs. rightist, religious vs. secular, capitalist vs. socialist, and technologically developed vs. undeveloped - fragment our thinking. Each only describes a particular aspect of a society, such as time period, geography, ideology, or level of technological development. Moreover, societies in all these categories have been unjust, violent, and repressive, so none help us answer the question of what is needed to build a caring democracy.

Even beyond this is a more basic problem with traditional social categories: all focus almost exclusively on the so-called public sphere of politics and economics from which women and children (the majority of humanity) traditionally have been barred (Eisler, 1987, 2000, 2014, 2016; Eisler & Potter, 2014). They fail to take into account findings from psychology and neuroscience showing that what children experience and observe early on impacts how their brains develop - and hence their beliefs, feelings, and actions, including how they vote (Eisler, 1995, 2014, 2016; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2015; Niehoff, 1999; Perry, 2002; Eisler & Fry, in progress).

Conventional studies of society also draw from this limited database. They too fail to include the *whole* of humanity (both its female and male halves) and the *whole* of our lives (not only the public sphere of politics and economics but also our family and other intimate relations) (Eisler, 1987, 2000, 2014, 2016; Eisler & Potter, 2014).

The *study of relational dynamics* (SRD) is a new multidisciplinary method of social analysis. It draws from an integrated database that encompasses the so-called public and private spheres as well as both the male and female halves of humanity.

This new method of analysis probes two relational dynamics. The first is what kinds of relations—from intimate to international—a particular culture encourages or discourages. The second is how various elements of a culture interactively relate to shape and maintain its basic character.

To analyze these relations, the study of relational dynamics applies systems analysis: the study of how different components of living systems interact to maintain one another and the larger whole of which they are a part (e.g., Ackoff, 1974; Emery & Trist, 1973). Academic sources for SRD include cross-cultural anthropological surveys (e.g., Coltrane, 1988; Murdock, 1969; Sanday, 1981; Textor, 1969); anthropological and sociological studies of individual societies (e.g., Abu-Lughod, 1986; Benedict, 1946; Giddens, 1984; Min, 1995; Schlegel, 1998; Sanday, 2002; Oliner & Oliner, 1992); findings from neuroscience (e.g., Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002; Kim, Evans, Angstadt, Ho, Sripada, Swain, & Phan, 2013; Muller, Marlowe, Bugumba, & Ellison, 2009; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2015; Niehoff, 1999; Super & Harkness, 1986; Fieve, Brill, Hutchings, Mednick, & Rosenthal, 1975; Gettler, McDade, Feranil, & Kuzawa, 2011); findings from primatology (e.g., de Waal, 2009; Sapolsky & Share, 2004); as well as analyses of laws, moral codes, art, literature (including fiction, biographies, and autobiographies), scholarship from psychology, history, economics, education, political science, philosophy, religious studies (including the study of “mystery cults” around the Mediterranean from before the rise of Christianity), archaeological studies (primarily of Western prehistory because of greater availability of materials, but also some of Indian and Chinese prehistory), the study of Western and Eastern myths and legends; and data from more recent fields such as chaos theory, systems self-organizing theory, nonlinear dynamics, gender studies, women’s studies, and men’s studies (for citations of sources, see, e.g., Eisler, 1987, 1995,

2000, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2015; Eisler & Levine, 2002). In addition, it has drawn from data obtained through personal experiences and observations obtained from living in Europe (Austria), Latin America (Cuba), and North America (the US), as well as travel (often including conferences and other meetings with diverse scholars) in Kenya, Japan, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Columbia, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Canada, Mexico, Russia, and European nations such as Finland, Sweden, Germany, Italy, France, Hungary, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Greece.

A distinguishing feature of the study of relational dynamics is that it pays particular attention to the comparative status of males and females as well as to childrearing practices. Unlike most sociological analyses, SRD examines how a society constructs gender roles and relations, as well parent-child relations, and how these in turn are related to its political and economic structures and beliefs. That is, while SRD recognizes the importance of family structures and normative beliefs about gender roles/relations and parenting practices, it examines these in their larger cultural, political, and economic contexts, showing how the two spheres interact. This systemic, child-development-focused, gender-balanced approach led to the identification of interactive patterns that keep repeating themselves cross-culturally and throughout prehistory and history: the contrasting social configurations of *domination systems* and *partnership systems* (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016)

TWO UNDERLYING SOCIAL CONFIGURATIONS

The interactive, mutually supporting configurations of the partnership system and the domination system transcend traditional social categories such as right or left, religious or secular, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, and so forth.

Cross-culturally and throughout history, societies adhering closely to the *domination system* - be they secular, like Nazi Germany in the West and Kim Jong Un's North

Korea in the East, or religious, like ISIS in the Middle East and Boko Haram in Africa - have the following core configuration:

- Authoritarian rule in *both* the family and state or tribe, with rigid hierarchies of domination;
- Ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, and a high valuing of so-called 'hard' or 'masculine' traits and activities like domination and violence;
- A high degree of institutionalized or built-in violence, from wife- and child-beating to war and terrorism, since fear and force ultimately maintain hierarchies of domination - be it man over man, man over woman, race over race, religion over religion, and so forth;
- Normative stories that present domination and violence as divinely or naturally ordained. (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016).

In societies that orient to the partnership system - be they ancient ones such as Catal Huyuk and other prehistoric Neolithic cultures, or modern cultures such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland - we see a different configuration:

- A more caring and democratic organization in *both* the family and state or tribe, with hierarchies of actualization where power is used to empower rather than disempower;
- The equal valuing of both halves of humanity, and high value given to so-called 'feminine' or 'soft' values such as caring and nonviolence (which are considered 'unmanly'" in domination systems);
- A less violent way of living, since violence is not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination, be it in families or the family of nations;

- Beliefs that present relations of mutual respect, accountability, and benefit as natural, and support hierarchies of actualization, where accountability and respect flow both ways rather than only from the bottom up, as in hierarchies of domination. (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016).

No society is a pure partnership or domination system. But looking at human history through the lens of the *partnership-domination social scale*, we see patterns that are not visible through the lenses of conventional social categories (Figure 1).

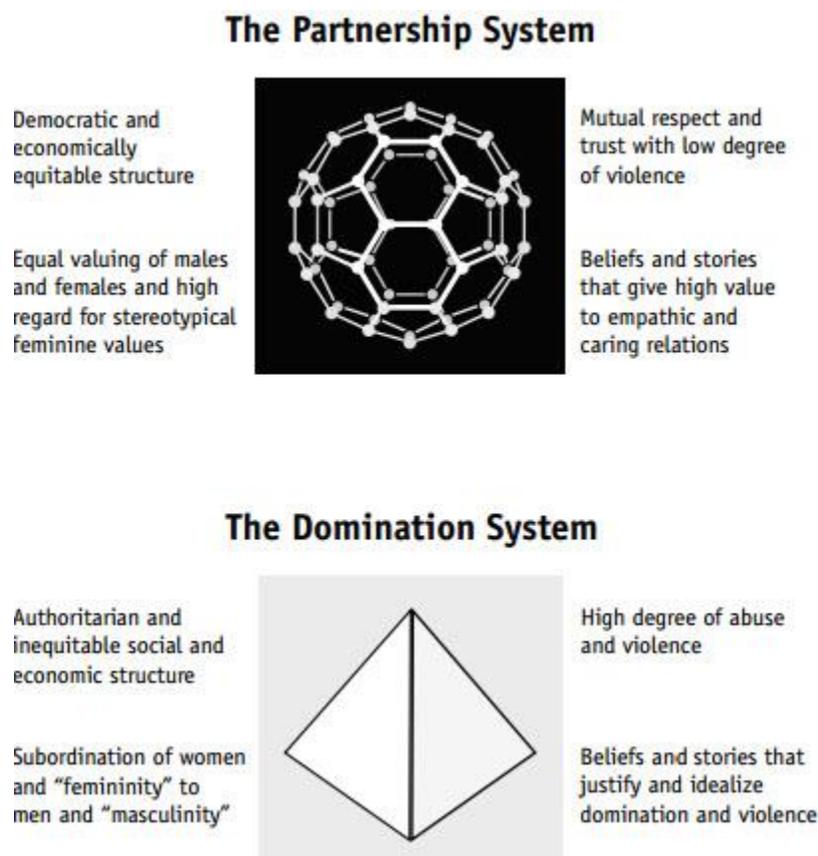


Figure 1. Partnership and Domination Systems

Reprinted with permission from Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (SF: Berrett-Koehler, 2007)

Regressives and Progressives in Modern History

The analytical lens of the partnership-domination social scale reveals the underlying tension between the partnership system and the domination system as two social possibilities throughout both history and prehistory. If we look at modern history through the lenses of old social categories, what we see seem to be unconnected events. Using the lens of the partnership-domination scale, we see patterns.

We see that over the last centuries, one progressive movement after another has challenged traditions of domination. These range from challenges to the 'divinely ordained' right of despotic kings to rule their 'subjects,' the 'divinely-ordained' right of men to rule the women and children in the 'castles' of their homes, and the 'divinely ordained' right of one race or nation to rule over another, to today's challenges to man's 'divinely ordained' right to dominate and conquer nature (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016).

We also see that all these movements have been fiercely resisted. While there was movement toward the partnership side (consider the changes in the West, from the European Middle Ages with its Inquisition, Crusades, and witch burnings, to today), there have also been regressions to more rigid domination - from Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes to religious fundamentalism, which is actually domination fundamentalism, pushing us back to a time when most men and all women did not question their subordinate place under those in control (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016).

If we look more closely, we also see something else of critical importance. Those pushing us back to a more autocratic, violent, and unjust social system uniformly work to maintain or impose rigid rankings of domination in gender and parent-child relations (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016).

For the Nazis, a top priority was getting women back into their 'traditional' place in a 'traditional' family - code words for a top-down, male-dominated, authoritarian

family. This was a priority for Stalin in the former Soviet Union and Khomeini in Iran, as well as for the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan and ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, it is a top priority for all so-called religious fundamentalists today - both Eastern and Western - who, not coincidentally, also back 'holy wars' and top-down theocratic tribal or state rule as 'divinely ordained'" (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016).

Yet for many people who consider themselves progressives, women's rights and children's rights are "just women's and children's issues." In contrast to regressives, for them the social construction of gender and parent-child relations is not a priority.

In sum, while regressives have had an integrated domination agenda, progressives have **not** had an integrated partnership agenda. They have focused on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: political and economic injustice and domination. But they have paid far less attention to injustice and domination in gender and parent-child relations - the primary human relations from which children first learn what is considered normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, moral or immoral.

As a result, the base of the domination pyramid has remained largely in place. And it is on this base that domination systems have kept rebuilding themselves in different forms - be they religious or secular, rightist or leftist, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern.

FOUR CORNERSTONES FOR AN INTEGRATED PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

When progressive make leaving behind traditions of domination, injustice, and violence in our primary human relations a priority, we will have solid foundations for a more equitable and peaceful caring democracy. Building these foundations requires an integrated progressive agenda.

Progressives have intuitively recognized four mutually supporting and interconnected cornerstones for either domination systems or partnership systems: family/childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and narratives/language. They understand that they are foundational to what kinds of political systems and policies we have. What follows describes these four cornerstones and proposes ways progressives can rebuild them so they support a caring democracy (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Four Cornerstones for Building Partnership Cultures

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The First Cornerstone: Family/Childhood Relations

Neuroscience shows that the neural pathways of our brains are not set at birth: they are largely formed in interaction with a child's early experiences (Narvaez, Panksepp,

Schore, & Gleason, 2015; Niehoff, 1999). This is why, although people can, and do, change throughout life, early experiences and relations are crucial.

If family relations based on chronic violations of human rights are considered normal and moral, they provide mental and emotional models for condoning such violations in other relations. If these relations are violent, children learn that violence from those who are more powerful toward those who are less powerful is an acceptable way of dealing with conflicts and/or problems (Eisler, 2013, 2014, 2016; Niehoff, 1999; Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore, & Gleason, 2015).

This explains why the integrated regressive worldview/political agenda places so much emphasis on teaching children, before their critical faculties are formed, that an authoritarian, male-headed, punitive family is either divinely or biologically ordained.

Fortunately, some people reject these teachings. Unfortunately, many replicate them, not only in their intimate relations but in *all* relations - including national and international ones. Since it is through childhood experiences and observations that people acquire habits of feeling, thinking, and behavior, authoritarian, male-headed, punitive families prepare people to accept, and even vote for, demagogic leaders who promise authoritarian, male-headed, punitive regimes as the solution to all problems, especially in uncertain times like ours.

Of course, even in families that model democracy, equality, non-violence, and caring, children need limits and rules. But to build foundations for a caring democracy, we must change traditions of abuse and violence in childhood relations. Practical ways of achieving this include:

Education: providing women and men the knowledge and skills for empathic, sensitive, nonviolent, authoritative rather than authoritarian childrearing. Parenting and relational education must be part of the curriculum. A resource for immediately

use in maternity wards and doctor's offices is the "Caring and Connected Parenting Guide" available free at www.centerforpartnership.org.

Legislation: enacting and enforcing laws criminalizing child abuse and funding education for nonviolent, empathic, and fair childrearing. "Protecting the Majority of Humanity" shows how international law could protect children and women.

Media: eliminating the presentation of violence as a means of resolving conflicts, and 'comedies' in which family members abuse and humiliate each other.

Morality: engaging spiritual and religious leaders to take a strong stand against intimate violence - the violence that every year blights, and often takes, the lives of millions of children and women worldwide, and leads to violence in all relations. This is the mission of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV).

The Second Cornerstone: Gender Relations

How a society constructs the roles and relations of the two basic forms of humans - male and female - not only affects both women's and men's individual life options; it affects families, education, religion, politics, and economics (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007, 2014, 2016).

When people learn to equate difference - beginning with the fundamental difference in our species between male and female - with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving, they internalize a template for in-group vs. out-group relations that can automatically be applied to other differences: racial, religious, ethnic, sexual orientation, and so forth.

Studies going back to World War II show that highly prejudiced people who respond to scapegoating and misogyny and vote for 'strong-man' leaders like Adolf Hitler typically grew up in authoritarian, rigidly male-dominated, highly punitive families (Adorno et al, 1965). This is why for regressives, a male-dominated, authoritarian family is a top priority. It is also why abuse and violence against women is condoned, and even commanded, in rigid domination regimes.

The social construction of gender roles and relations also impacts a society's guiding values. Along with the subordination of the female half of humanity that we inherited from more rigid domination times comes the subordination of traits and activities stereotypically associated with femininity, such as caring, caregiving, and non-violence that in domination systems are considered unfit for 'real men.' Studies show that even in more democratic societies, people from authoritarian, punitive families in which male dominance is the ideal norm tend to vote for 'hard' or so-called 'masculine' policies (like weapons and prisons) and against funding for 'soft' so-called 'feminine' policies (like caring for children and people's health) (Milburn & Conrad, 1996).

This *gendered system of values* adversely affects general quality of life. *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life* - a study based on statistics from 89 nations conducted by the Center for Partnership Studies - found that the status of women is a powerful predictor of general quality of life (Eisler, Loye, & Norgaard, 1995). Since then, other studies, such as the World Economic Forums' *Gender Gap Reports*, have confirmed this correlation between the status of women and a nation's economic success and quality of life (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010).

Sweden, Finland, and Norway have narrow gender gaps. These nations pioneered caring policies such as universal health care, high quality early childhood education, generous paid parental leave, and elder care with dignity, along with greater focus on caring for our natural environment. This is *not* coincidental. It is directly related to the higher status of women (including almost equal representation in national legislatures), and with this, priority given to caring, whether for people or nature (Eisler, 2007, 2012).

A sign of hope is the blurring of rigid gender stereotypes. Men are nurturing babies and women are entering positions of economic and political leadership. Another sign of hope is that the movement for women's rights - including reproductive freedom and the right to freedom from violence in their own families - is advancing globally.

But this movement remains slow and localized, and is fiercely opposed in some cultures and subcultures.

To build foundations for a caring democracy, the equal valuing of men and women and ending traditions of domination and violence in gender relations must be a progressive priority.

The Third Cornerstone: Economic Relations

Current economic systems endanger the life-support systems of nature. The gap between haves and have-nots has been growing both between and within nations. As we move further into the postindustrial age, more and more jobs are being taken over by automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence. Poverty seems intractable, speculation is rampant, and so are uncaring financial practices.

This is a crisis. But it is also an opportunity to build a new economic system that recognizes that the real wealth of our world consists of the contributions of people and of nature: a “caring economics.” As documented in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* and discussed in more detail in my article on economics in this issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, moving to this more humane and sustainable economics is not only vital for human and environmental reasons, but for purely economic ones (Eisler, 2007, 2017).

Economists tell us that the most important capital for the postindustrial information/knowledge era is high-quality human capital.” Whether or not we have this capital largely depends on the kind of care and early education children receive. And whether or not children receive good care and early education in turn depends heavily on policy support for this essential work (Eisler, 1995, 2012, 2017).

This support is also essential to cut through cycles of poverty, since, worldwide, women still do the bulk of care work for very low wages in the market and for free in homes - largely accounting for the disproportionate poverty of women globally.

It makes no sense to talk of hunger and poverty in generalities when the mass of the world's poor and the poorest of the poor are women and children. Even in the rich United States, women over the age of 65 are, according to U.S. Census statistics, twice as likely to be poor as men over 65 (Gallagher Robbins & Morrison, 2014). A major reason is that most of these women are, or were, either full or part time caregivers.

Positive trends are that many West European nations now offer monetary assistance and education for parenting, along with paid parental leave, universal health care, and high-quality early childhood education. Satellite economic indicators are also counting the economic value of the work of caregiving in homes. The Swiss government found that if the unpaid work in households were included, it would constitute 40 percent of the reported Swiss GDP. A recent Australian study found an even higher value of 50 percent (Hoenig & Page, 2012).

But the economic indicators that policy makers rely on - GDP and GNP - still fail to include this essential work. Nor is the economic value of this work recognized by most GDP alternatives.

The invisibility of care work - be it caring for people in homes, social justice work, or environmental work - in measures of economic health is a major obstacle to a caring economics, an integral component of a caring democracy (Noddings, 2002; Eisler, 2007; Tronto, 2013).

To address this, the Center for Partnership Studies' Caring Economy Campaign (CEC) demonstrates the enormous return on investment from caregiver tax credits, Social Security for caregivers, subsidies for childcare, and other policies that support caring for people, starting in early childhood. The CEC's new Social Wealth Economic indicators show the enormous economic value of the work of care and early education, as well as focusing attention on marginalized populations, such as people

of color and immigrants in the United States (Ghosh & Eisler, 2014). The CEC also offers online resources, training, and advocacy opportunities, including an online leadership training program.

Economic systems are human creations. We can change them.

The Fourth Cornerstone: Narratives/Language

A caring democracy requires more accurate narratives about “‘human nature.’” This will require a concerted effort through the arts, music, literature, science, and education.

Religious stories about “original sin” and secular stories about “evolutionary imperatives” claim that humans are innately sinful and violent - and hence must be rigidly controlled. Often these narratives invoke “survival of the fittest” and claim Darwin as their authority, when in fact Darwin apologized for using this term in his book on human evolution, where he emphasized love and mutual aid as central to our species (Darwin, 2004; Loye, 2007, 2010)

These stories ignore findings from neuroscience demonstrating that though we humans have the capacity for cruelty, oppression, and violence, we are actually wired more for empathic, mutually beneficial, caring relationships. For example, studies show that the so-called pleasure centers in our brains light up more when we share than when we win (Rilling et al., 2002).

Other common narratives teach us that dominating or being dominated are our only alternatives - that this is how it has always been and always will be. These stories ignore the fact that for most of prehistory the majority of cultures oriented more to the partnership side of the social scale (Fry, 2015). As detailed in *The Chalice and the Blade*, *Sacred Pleasure*, and other works, there are no signs of warfare in the archeological record until a few thousand years ago; houses and burials do not reflect large gaps between haves and have-nots (Eisler, 1987, 1995; Platon, 1966; Gimbutas,

1982; Mellaart, 1967; Marinatos, 1993); and, as Ian Hodder (the archeologist now excavating the large Neolithic site of Catal Huyuk) notes, these earlier societies were neither patriarchies nor matriarchies, but cultures in which women and men were equally valued (Hodder, 2004).

Archeology and myths also reveal signs of a major cultural shift toward the domination system during a period of great disequilibrium in our prehistory - a shift that we have been trying to reverse, especially during the last several centuries (Kramer & Maier, 1989; Mallory, 1989; Gimbutas, 1982; DeMeo, 1991; Lerner, 1987; Eisler, 1987, 1995). As noted earlier, one progressive social movement after another has been challenging traditions of domination during the disequilibrium brought by the shift from the agrarian to the industrial and now post-industrial age (Eisler, 1995, 2014, 2016).

However, as also noted earlier, this movement toward partnership has been fiercely resisted and punctuated by periodic regressions. We are in a time of such regression today.

This is why we need an integrated progressive agenda that focuses on replacing the foundations on which domination systems have kept rebuilding themselves in different forms. Implementing this agenda requires the new thinking made possible by the new language of the partnership system and the domination system.

CONCLUSION

To build solid foundations for a caring democracy, we have to recognize the connections revealed by the contrasting social configurations of partnership systems and domination systems. This requires a systems approach to the study of society that reveals the interconnection between, on the one hand, whether a society is peaceful and equitable or warlike and inequitable, and, on the other hand, how it structures

the most fundamental human relations: the relations between the female and male halves of humanity and between them and their daughters and sons.

There are important implications from this integrated approach for both academicians and practitioners. It is up to us to show that the struggle for our future is not between religion and secularism, right and left, East and West, or capitalism and socialism, but between traditions of domination and a partnership way of life *within* all these societies.

To move to a more equitable, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable world requires that we accelerate the cultural transformation from domination to partnership. With an integrated progressive agenda focused on the four cornerstones of family/childhood, gender, economics, and narratives/ language, we can build the foundations for a caring democracy in which all children can realize their capacities for consciousness, caring, and creativity - the capacities that make us fully human.

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