

NURTURING OUR HUMANITY: A CONVERSATION WITH RIANE EISLER, JD, PhD(hon)

Interviewed by Heidi Bruce, MA

Abstract

Heidi Bruce, Managing Editor of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, interviews the founder of the Center for Partnership Studies, Riane Eisler. Our focus is *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*, Eisler's book co-authored with Douglas P. Fry, recently published by Oxford University Press. In the book, the authors provide a new analytical tool, the *biocultural partnership-domination lens*, which integrates knowledge to solve personal, social, economic, and environmental problems.

Keywords: Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens; partnership societies; domination-oriented cultures; neuroscience; gendered system of values; adverse childhood experiences; gender roles and relations.

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Heidi Bruce: Your newest book, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (2019), continues the exploration of how our cultures shape our lives that you have pursued for many years, but breaks new ground. What inspired you to write this book now?

Riane Eisler: I became fascinated with findings from neuroscience that provide “hard” evidence validating the new social categories of the *domination system* and the

partnership system that I first introduced in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1988). *Nurturing Our Humanity* provides evidence from biological and social science about the urgent need for new social categories that no longer marginalize or ignore how our primary childhood and gender relations are culturally constructed, and how this is integrally related to politics, economics, and every other social institution. Most importantly, it provides practical interventions to prevent further regressions to domination, such as we are experiencing today.

I had been working on this book for eight years, and four years ago I invited anthropologist Douglas Fry to co-author it. He is a leading expert on foraging societies, which he calls “the original partnership societies.” This is how we humans lived for many thousands of years of our cultural evolution - so his findings powerfully debunk the popular belief that evolutionary imperatives drive us to war, rape, etc.

We wrote this book to challenge not only false assumptions about “human nature,” but also the fragmented way social systems are still generally viewed and taught. *Nurturing Our Humanity* shows how we can build solid foundations for a more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable world - but that to do this, we have to leave many old assumptions behind.

Bruce: *Nurturing Our Humanity* presents findings from neuroscience showing that our environments, especially what we experience and observe early on in our family, gender, and other intimate relations, shape our brains, affecting how we think, feel, and act as adults. How do these findings support your model of the partnership-domination spectrum of societies?

Eisler: These findings go a long way toward explaining why people think and act so very differently depending on the degree to which their culture or subculture orients to the

partnership or domination end of the partnership-domination social scale. *Nurturing Our Humanity* introduces the *biocultural partnership-domination lens* as a tool for understanding and transforming social systems. Unlike conventional studies of society, this analytical tool takes into account the fact that what children experience and observe early on in their family, gender, and other intimate relations directly affects how their brains develop - and hence how they think, feel, and act as adults.

We humans are not born with fully formed brains. Our brains develop in interaction with our cultural environments, as mediated by families, education, religion, and other social institutions. So, in domination environments, we can expect what we see in sharp relief in authoritarian, violent, and repressive societies - whether secular and rightist, like Nazi Germany, or secular and leftist, like Stalin's Soviet Union, or religious and Eastern, like ISIS and the Taliban in the Middle East and the rightist-fundamentalist alliance in the West. A top priority for every one of these regimes or would-be regimes was, and is, a "traditional" family - code for an authoritarian, rigidly male-dominated, highly punitive family. This is because these kinds of childhood, gender, and other intimate relations are foundational to their domination systems.

However, we cannot see any of this through the lenses of conventional social categories such as right vs. left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, and so forth. Nor can we see these connections from the perspective of conventional social analyses, all of which ignore, or at best marginalize, our primary childhood and gender relations - the relations children first experience and observe that have such a profound impact on how their brains develop, and with this how they feel, think, and act.

This omission and/or marginalization should not surprise us, because out of 1600 years of modern Western science, it was only 50 years ago that women's studies, and then men's, gender, and queer studies, even began to be taught in universities. And to this

day, they are marginalized in our siloed universities. As for findings from psychology and neuroscience about child development, that too is only taught in relation to individual families - when it should be part of sociology, political science, economics, etc.

This is why the integrated method of analysis provided by the biocultural partnership-domination lens is so exciting - and essential.

Bruce: *Nurturing Our Humanity* provides evidence from biological and social science that the default for humans is not domination and violence, but caring, sharing, and nonviolence, and that the current regression to hate, strongman rule, etc. is not inevitable. Please tell us more about that.

Eisler: *Nurturing Our Humanity* brings together many studies showing that the familiar story about human nature we have been taught, be it “original sin” or “selfish genes,” is frontally contradicted by the evidence. For example, studies show that the “pleasure circuitry” of our brains lights up more when we share than when we win. Other studies show the enormous pleasure people derive from giving to others. *Nurturing Our Humanity* also introduces a new hypothesis about the importance of care and love in human evolution, proposing that these are integral to the emergence of our species - again based on what we today know about the need for at least some degree of care and love - not only for children’s survival but for human development. But again, the scientific study of love is still in its infancy, as this “soft” or stereotypically “feminine” human emotion has not been considered worthy of study until recently.

Bruce: Your book suggests that domination systems are basically trauma factories. Studies of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Adverse Childhood Experiences, 2019); Felitti et al., 1998; Karatekin & Almy, 2019) show that many people carry

traumas from their childhood, yet this issue is often negated or, at best, marginalized. How can we use *Nurturing Our Humanity* to show the connection between the politics and economics of domination systems and domination-oriented family relations?

Eisler: *Nurturing Our Humanity* connects the dots between what we today know about stress and trauma, and the economics and politics of domination. Stressful early experiences are a major source of childhood trauma. As shown by the ACEs and other studies, even in the United States these stressful childhood experiences are extremely prevalent - yet these findings are not generally publicized, and even when they are talked about, it is in relation only to individuals and families, not to the larger society. Yet practices that cause enormous childhood stress are social issues. They are our legacy from earlier, more rigid domination-oriented cultures in which harsh, punitive childrearing was the ideal norm (think of the Bible verse, Proverbs 13:24, “Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.” So even though the American Psychological Association stated that not only is spanking ineffective but also harmful (Sege & Siegel, 2018), surveys show the persistence of the belief that physically hurting children is a good parenting practice (Crandall, 2019). Parenting guides by so-called Christian denominations urge parents to teach children that “the parents’ word is law” through practices such as physically punishing 18-month old babies for not sitting still in their high chairs (Rosin, 1999).

Not only do these “traditional” parenting practices have adverse personal health effects, as shown by the ACEs studies; they also directly affect politics and economics. For example, psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswik (1958) found that people who scored high on the fascist scale typically came from what she called authoritarian families. These were not only highly prejudiced people, but also people who found it very difficult to even perceive changed circumstances. For instance, when shown pictures of a dog that gradually morphed into a cat, these people continued to see a dog. In

Frenkel-Brunswik's words, "It is as if *any stimulus* [plays] the role of an authority to which the subject feels compelled to submit" (p. 680, emphasis hers).

Findings from neuroscience go even further: they show that in people who describe themselves as "very conservative," the brain region involved in recognizing change (the anterior cingulate cortex) is smaller (Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee (2007); Jost & Amodio, 2012). This can help explain, for example, how people can cling to climate change denial.

Frenkel-Brunswik (1958) repeatedly observed that the inability to recognize the need for changing one's perceptions, and the accompanying denial of reality, is connected with denial about childhood experiences and the displacement of fear and pain to culturally marginalized groups. For children in domination families, it is far too dangerous to disagree with their parents, let alone blame them for the pain they inflict. To do so would only add to the children's stress and pain, since they are helpless to change their circumstances. It is easier for such children to believe that they deserve this treatment, and to love those who cause them pain. Hence the frequent idealization of punitive parents by their adult children, as well as the tendency of people brought up this way to idealize "strong" leaders and to scapegoat "weak" out-groups.

This "in-group versus out-group" thinking, feeling, and acting is further inculcated in children in domination-oriented families through rigid gender stereotypes and the ranking of male over female. The equation of difference with superior and inferior status, dominating and being dominated, being served and serving - beginning with the difference in our species between the male and female forms - is characteristic of domination families. And it provides children with a template for viewing all who are different as inferior, possibly dangerous, and even immoral. This is why domination or would-be domination regimes focus so strongly on the subordination of women and the

“feminine” - and why there is a connection between male-dominance and in-group versus out-group thinking and persecution, whether based on race, religion, or sexual orientation. In Europe this focus led to the anti-Semitism behind the Holocaust; in the United States it leads to racism; in the Middle East it leads to Sunni vs. Shia or Shia vs. Sunni, and so on.

What makes these psychological dynamics so difficult to dislodge is that they are acquired before children’s brains, much less their critical faculties, are fully formed. This again is why, in order to move forward, we must shift childhood and gender relations from domination to partnership.

It is also why to move forward we have to leave old social categories - such as right vs. left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western - behind, and look at societies through the integrated lens of the partnership-domination social scale.

Bruce: *Nurturing Our Humanity* shows that the nations that have moved more towards the partnership side of the partnership-domination cultural scale rank higher not only in economic performance but also in happiness (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018). How can we best help people understand and use the paradigm of the partnership-domination cultural scale? And what are some concrete ways in which we can show the benefits of building partnership-oriented societies in which caring for people and nature are top social priorities?

Eisler: Northern European nations such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland have made significant strides toward the partnership configuration. First, they are more democratic and more equal in both the family and the state (Eisler & Fry, 2019). Second, they have more gender parity (for example, women comprise 40 to 50 percent of national legislatures), and “feminine” values and activities like caring and caregiving

are supported by policies such as universal health care, good childcare, and generous parental leave (Eisler & Fry, 2019). Third, they have less violence, as reflected by low crime rates. They also pioneered laws making physical discipline against children illegal; and they established the first peace studies in universities (Eisler & Fry, 2019).

The story of Finland is particularly striking. Like other Nordic nations, Finland suffered from famines and had huge infant and adult mortality rates in the early 20th century. But because of a determined nation-wide effort that began with universal education for girls and boys and a strong women's movement, Finland gradually instituted high-quality health care, universal childbirth preparation for mothers and fathers, and public support for families with children in the form of child daycare and home help services. Finland has the sixth lowest infant mortality rate in the world—while the United States ranks 55th—and a premier health-care system available to all citizens. Finland is in the top ranks of United Nations measures of quality of life, including longevity, as well as the World Economic Forum's measures of global competitiveness. Moreover, like other Nordic nations, it ranks high in both international equality and happiness reports (Pietila, 2001; Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018).

We must inform others of these facts showing that moving toward the partnership system benefits everyone, personally, socially, morally, and economically. These nations are *not* socialist (they have private property and successful market economies). They are what they often call themselves: caring societies. Nor is this caring due to their relatively small size and homogeneity; other relatively small and homogeneous societies, such as Saudi Arabia, that orient to the domination system, are far from caring.

What distinguishes these happier, more prosperous, more peaceful, and more equitable societies is their partnership configuration.

Bruce: Please share more about how the book's emphasis on changes in gender roles and relations impacts economics and quality of life.

Eisler: The two prevailing economic theories, capitalism and socialism, came out of times in the West when women and the feminine were even more devalued than they are today. For both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, care work was to be performed for free by women in male-controlled households. This "women's work" was male property - so much so that in most places, as late as the 19th century, a wife could not even sue if she was negligently injured; only her husband could sue for the loss of her services.

This is the system of gendered values we inherited. Not surprisingly given the more rigid domination orientation in the 1700s and 1800s when Smith and Marx crafted their theories, neither saw the care work in households performed by women as economically productive. They relegated it to "reproductive" rather than "productive" work, which is still how work is classified and taught in economics schools, classes, and texts. And there is nothing in either capitalist or socialist theory about the economic value of caring for people or caring for our natural life-support systems.

We inherited this *gendered system of values* from earlier, more domination-oriented times. So, to this day, caring for people, starting in early childhood, and caring for our Mother Earth, is not recognized as economically valuable. And this misperception persists despite studies showing its fallacy. An example is a recent Australian study that found that if the care work in families were included it would constitute 50 percent of the reported GDP (Hoenig & Page, 2012).

This devaluation of caring and other activities considered "soft" or "feminine" is potentially disastrous in our time of growing environmental threats. It is also dysfunctional from a purely economic perspective as we move further into the post-

industrial service/knowledge era. We know from neuroscience that whether or not we have the “high quality human capital” needed for success in this new technological age largely hinges on the quality of care and education children receive early on. Support for these activities, as we see in the more partnership-oriented nations described above, supports a well-functioning economy - and it has a positive impact on quality of life for everyone.

On the other hand, domination economics are inherently unequal - whether they were ancient Chinese empires, Arab sheikdoms, the mercantilism that in the West replaced feudalism, or more recently socialism as applied in China and the former Soviet Union and the neoliberal “trickle down” capitalism resurging in the West today.

Bruce: Your book provides grounded hope for a less violent, more equitable and sustainable future. How can we help lay foundations for this?

Eisler: *Nurturing Our Humanity* provides a roadmap to a less violent, more equitable and sustainable future. It shows that during the last several centuries, during the disequilibrium brought by the industrial revolution, one progressive movement after another challenged traditions of domination - from the “divinely ordained” right of kings to rule their “subjects,” the “divinely ordained” right of men to rule over women and children, and the “divinely ordained” right of a “superior” race to rule over “inferior” ones, all the way to the environmental movement challenging the once hallowed “conquest of nature” that at our level of technology threatens our survival. But these movements focused primarily on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid - politics and economics as conventionally defined. As a result, traditions of domination and violence in the childhood and gender relations that people first experience and observe have largely remained in place, providing the foundations on which, in regression after regression, dominations systems keep rebuilding themselves.

Nurturing Our Humanity describes four cornerstones needed to support a partnership-oriented world: childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and narratives and language.

I have already talked about leaving behind traditions of domination and violence in childhood and gender relations, and about the need for a new economic paradigm that recognizes the real value of the work of caring and caregiving, not only in the market, where U.S. childcare workers are paid less than dog walkers, but also in households, through the social policies described above. I also talked about the need for new narratives, especially about “human nature” that are based on evidence rather than domination prejudices. So, I want to close by focusing on the urgent need for new language, especially the new social categories of the partnership system and the domination system.

We cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them. And linguistic psychologists have long told us that the categories provided by a culture’s language channel our thinking (Ornstein, 1972).

It is high time we left behind the old right/left, religious/secular, Eastern/Western, etc. dichotomies we have been taught. If we really think about it, we see that there have there been oppressive, violent, and repressive regimes in all these categories. Moreover, by describing only one or another aspect of societies and giving little or no attention to our primary childhood and gender relations, these old categories, which came out of more rigid domination times, effectively fragment our consciousness.

By contrast, the biocultural partnership-domination lens introduced in *Nurturing Our Humanity* shows what we need to move forward - and how to take the actions to do so.

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Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(h) is president of the [Center for Partnership Studies \(CPS\)](#), Editor-in-Chief of the [Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies](#), and internationally known as author of [The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future](#) (now in 57 U.S. printings and 27 foreign editions) and other books. Her [The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics](#) was hailed by Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking.” Her recent [Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future](#) (co-authored with anthropologist Douglas Fry; Oxford University Press, 2019) combines her research with the latest findings from the social and biological sciences, especially neuroscience. A refugee from Nazi Europe as a child, she has addressed the UN General Assembly, the U.S. Department of State, and congressional briefings, and authored over 500 articles published in outlets including *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, and *International Journal of Women's Studies*. Eisler’s research, writing, and speaking has transformed the lives of people worldwide.