

RE-EXAMINING DARWIN AND HUMAN EVOLUTION FROM A PARTNERSHIP PERSPECTIVE: A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID LOYE, PhD

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD (hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler talks with her husband, social psychologist and Darwin scholar David Loye, about his re-examination of Darwin's theory of evolution and how and why the role of love, moral sensitivity, mutual aid, and other partnership values has been ignored in most evolutionary narratives, whereas selfishness, violence, and other traits key to imposing and maintaining domination systems have been presented as key to human evolution.

Keywords: Darwin, evolution, human evolution, love, mutuality, morality, war, survival of the fittest, partnership, mutual aid.

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Riane Eisler: Thank you, David for your important work, which is so aligned with the cultural shift from domination to partnership. As you know, this journal is dedicated to gathering and publishing the best scholarship on this subject, as well as contributions from practitioners and others working to facilitate and accelerate this shift. The vision of our journal is “To share scholarship and create connections for cultural transformation to build a world in which all relationships, institutions, policies, and organizations are based on principles of partnership” (*Interdisciplinary Journal of*

Partnership Studies, n.d.). Mutuality, love, and moral sensitivity are essential components of partnership cultures, so your work re-examining Charles Darwin's theories is directly relevant to this cultural transformation. But I want to start with your background, as a scholar and writer with a strong commitment to human rights, as exemplified in your first book, *The Healing of a Nation*, which won a national award for the best book on race relations (earlier awarded to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gunnar Myrdal). What led you to write this book?

David Loye: I wanted to contribute to the movement for racial equality, so this book goes back to the drive for civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s. I grew up in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, a wealthy oil town where there was a lot of prejudice against people of color, Jews, etc. Even in my teens, I rebelled against that and fought against it. My commitment to changing old thinking goes way back to the passion I developed for the New Deal proposed by President Roosevelt. Years later, when I was working for my doctorate in social psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York City, I hoped that by applying social science as well as the history of race relations since colonial days to social action, *The Healing of a Nation* could provide practical tools to advance this and other important causes. The book concludes with recommendations for actions for a U.S. President, and was influential in launching a series of social experiments such as Town Hall meetings.

Eisler: You also have a background as a journalist. How did that influence you and your research?

Loye: During World War II I was a journalist in the Navy, and after the war I became an early TV newsmen and news films producer. So writing became a big part of my life. Being a journalist also brought me in touch with people in all walks of life, giving me a better understanding of our entire social system, of how things are put together in real

life. Of particular importance for my research in social science is that it reinforced my not taking the word of authorities, but rather digging for the facts. This has proved central to my research and to books such as *The Leadership Passion*, *The Knowable Future*, *The Sphinx and the Rainbow*, and *An Arrow through Chaos*, in all of which I question conventional assumptions. It also led to my 30-year immersion in reclaiming what I called “Darwin’s lost theory.”

Eisler: You pioneered the re-examination and re-interpretation of Darwin’s work regarding human evolution. Please tell us how and why you started to do this.

Loye: It was back in the Cold War days, when the USSR and the United States were locked in a battle for nuclear supremacy that endangered the world. I was invited to join an international group of scientists from both the US and Soviet sides at a meeting in Budapest called by systems scientist and former Program Director for the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, Ervin Laszlo, to see if a new perspective on evolution could help defuse this dangerous situation. To make a long story short, I eventually decided to go back and see what Darwin actually had to say about human evolution. So I downloaded a copy of Darwin’s book *The Descent of Man* (1871/1981a, b), to take a look. What I found surprised me a great deal, and set in motion the systemic re-examination of Darwin’s theories that I detail in *Darwin’s Lost Theory* (2010a), which differs markedly from the prevailing focus on “survival of the fittest” and “selfish genes.”

Eisler: What did you find?

Loye: When I did a word search of the computerized copy of *The Descent of Man*, I of course looked for “survival of the fittest,” the phrase so often used to describe Darwin’s theory of evolution. To my surprise, I found that in more than 800 pages on human

evolution, he only used the term “survival of the fittest” two times. And one of these was to express regret for having ever used this phrase. So I thought I would then search a word that in key ways is the exact opposite of the way survival of the fittest has been interpreted: love. I discovered that Darwin wrote about love 95 times - but love was only mentioned once in the index of the book. Next I searched “selfishness” and found that he only wrote about it 6 times, whereas he wrote of “moral sensitivity” 92 times.

So in fundamental ways, what Darwin had to say about human evolution is the opposite of what we have been taught - for example, the story that we are driven by “selfish genes.”

But that is not all. I found that in fascinating ways Darwin prefigured much that is today considered leading edge science.

Eisler: How did Darwin prefigure leading edge science?

Loye: Chaos theory and self-organizing theory are current alternatives to the old linear theories about evolution. I found in Darwin passages that amazingly prefigure these. For example in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (1859)*, Darwin wrote: “The most important of all causes of organic change is one which is almost independent of altered and perhaps suddenly altered physical conditions, namely the mutual relation of organism to organism, the improvement of one organism entailing the improvement or extermination of others” (p. 243).

Then in *The Descent of Man*, he was even more explicit when he wrote, “...there is a large class of variations which may be provisionally called spontaneous, for to our ignorance they appear to arise without any exciting causes. It can, however, be shewn

that such variations ... depend much more on the constitution of the organism than on the nature of the conditions to which it has been subjected” (1871/1981b, pp.39-40).

This definitely prefigures self-organizing theory, and Darwin had this pivotal insight almost 150 years ago. He was indeed way ahead of his time. What he is saying is that the prevailing impression is that we humans are driven by natural selection as pressure from outside, but actually, changes we make to adapt to new circumstances come from within us.

Most important is that Darwin recognized that when it comes to human evolution, we shift from purely biological to cultural evolution. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote: “Important as the struggle for existence has been and even still is, yet as far as the highest part of man’s nature is concerned there are other agencies more important. For the moral qualities are advanced, either directly or indirectly, much more through the effects of habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, etc., than through natural selection” ((1871/1981a, pp. 403-404).

Eisler: This is fascinating, because what you are saying is that in his thinking of so many years ago Darwin sensed from his observations one of the central themes of our new book *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives and Future* (2019), that it is the interactions of genes with children’s experiences as shaped by their cultures as mediated through families, education, religion, and other institutions that determine nothing less than how our brains develop.

Loye: Yes, and there is more. Throughout *The Descent of Man* Darwin repeatedly builds the case for what he called mutual aid, community, and community selection. So he prefigured what we today know from neuroscience and you and your co-author Douglas Fry write about in *Nurturing Our Humanity*: that it is not genes but gene expression

that matters, hence the importance of culture. He also prefigured partnership ideas, as he focused not only on culture but on our positive capacities as humans. This is what positive psychology focuses on today, and so does your book.

Eisler: Yes, in accordance with Darwin's focus on love and mutual aid, *Nurturing Our Humanity* shows that actually the default for humans is not aggression and violence but rather sharing and caring: the core values governing partnership rather than domination systems. Which brings me to my next questions: Why, in light of all this, is Darwin still so narrowly interpreted today? How did this happen? How is it, in your words, that Darwin is still used to buttress the belief that domination rather than partnership systems are inevitable, just "human nature"?

Loye: At the very beginning of *The Descent of Man*, Darwin made it clear that in this book he was moving from non-human to human evolution. He wrote, "I have been led to put together my notes, so as to see how far the general conclusions arrived at in my former works were applicable to man" (1871/1981a, p.1). What he found is that other factors become paramount in human evolution, factors such as, in his words, "habit, the reasoning powers, instruction, religion, etc." (1871/1981a, pp. 403-404). He made it very clear when he wrote this that in human evolution these factors are very important.

There were many factors that led to this part of Darwin's work being ignored, but of paramount importance in my estimation is that the "robber barons" of the Gilded Age, who controlled the political and economic system, embraced what became known as "Social Darwinism." Waving the "survival of the fittest" flag, they not only justified their power and excesses; they also influenced scholarship. Of course, this would not have been possible had the cultural legacy of domination we carry not been so strong. Darwin writing about love, mutual aid, moral sensitivity, and other "soft" or "feminine"

values and activities that are devalued in domination systems simply did not fit into that paradigm.

Another factor was that the study of evolution became the property of biological rather than social science, with the bulk of people whose writings about evolution were published, such as the “Neo-Darwinians,” focused on biological rather than cultural factors, factors in which they had no training and hence little if any knowledge.

As I document in my book, *Darwin’s Second Revolution* (2010b), this was passionately decried by Darwin’s disciple, George Romanes, who wrote when he was dying of cancer: Why “not only do the Neo-Darwinians strain the teachings of Darwin; they positively reverse those teachings—representing as anti-Darwinian the whole of one side of Darwin’s system...” Specifically, why “so greatly have some of the Neo-Darwinians misunderstood the teachings of Darwin, that they represent as ‘Darwinian heresy’ any suggestions in the way of factors ‘supplementary to,’ or ‘co-operative with’ natural selection” (Romanes, 1892/2012, p. 9-10).

This pattern continued until late in the 20th century, first with sociobiology and then with its offshoot of evolutionary psychology. It is really only in recent years that a few people have started to take a fresh look at Darwin, and they, as well as new findings from neuroscience showing the importance of culture in human brain development, are beginning to open the way for a new theory of evolution.

Eisler: You have said that we urgently need a more complete theory of evolution. Can you elaborate?

Loye: As I said earlier, Darwin made it clear that in human evolution other factors than natural selection come into play. Yet by focusing solely on Darwin’s writings on non-

human evolution in *On the Origin of Species*, what happened is that the conventional evolutionary narrative made Darwin a kind of “187-pound gorilla,” used to justify all kinds of inhumanities as our evolutionary heritage. Your book shows that this view of our evolution ignores the facts, not only findings from neuroscience showing we humans are actually more predisposed to nonviolence and mutuality, but also findings that during the many thousands of years our species survived by gathering and hunting, that is by foraging, our cultural evolution was in peaceful, egalitarian, and gender-balanced societies - societies that were partnership-oriented rather than domination-oriented. We urgently need a theory of evolution that takes these findings into account, including the observations of Darwin himself about the cultural factors that must be considered in human evolution - factors that we can, and must, address, and that this journal addresses from the perspective of partnership studies.

Eisler: As you know, one of the key themes of *Nurturing Our Humanity* is the impact of childhood experiences and observations and how these differ in domination or partnership cultural environments. In your article “Untangling Partnership and Domination Morality” (Loye, 2013), you also emphasize the importance of what children observe and experience, and describe the damage caused by the authoritarian, highly punitive families characteristic of cultures that orient to the domination side of the partnership-domination social scale.

Loye: Yes, my research as a social psychologist as well as many other studies, including those you cite in your book, reveal how children learn to identify with the punitive parent who causes them fear and pain, and then deflect these feelings against out-groups, whether it’s people of a darker skin color, as in the United States, or people of a different faith, as in Shia versus Sunni and Sunni versus Shia in the Muslim world today.

Not only that, as I point out in the article you mention and in other works, the biographies of tyrannical, bloodthirsty leaders, whether Hitler or Saddam Hussein, show how their childhood fear, anger, and hate against parents who caused them pain or failed to protect them is deflected in this way. Examples are Hitler's murder of millions of Jews and other "non-Aryans" and Saddam Hussein's use of mustard gas and the nerve agents sarin and tabun against Iraqi Kurds and others. This connection between abuse and violence in childhood and later violence has been well documented, though strangely it is still largely ignored.

I want to add, however, that because our brains are so flexible, most of us can override even the worst of early experiences.

Eisler: You are now 94 years old. What message do you have for young scholars and practitioners?

Loye: It is difficult for young scholars to deviate from the canon, from what they are trained to study in their disciplines and therefore taught to believe is true. Yet the evidence we have today is overwhelming, that some ideas that have been passed on as truth -for example, how Darwin has been taught - are largely based on fiction rather than fact. So my advice to young scholars and practitioners is this: Please inform yourselves, please go outside the prevailing paradigm. Please shift your ways of thinking, and with them, your research and your theoretical frame. You have an important part to play in leaving behind the old thinking that has been used to justify violence, discrimination, and injustice, and to instead usher in a new paradigm. We urgently need this!

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David Loye, PhD, is a social psychologist, evolutionary systems scientist, and author of numerous books, including the national award-winning *The Healing of a Nation*, *The Leadership Passion*, *The Knowable Future*, *The Sphinx and the Rainbow*, *Arrow through Chaos*, *Darwin's Lost Theory*, *The Great Adventure*, *Rediscovering Darwin*, and *Darwin's Second Revolution*. His most recent book, *Grandfather's Garden*, is a set of whimsical fables for both children and adults. A former Princeton and UCLA School of Medicine faculty member, Loye is co-founder of the Center for Partnership Studies, the General Evolution Research Group, the Society for Chaos Theory in the Living Sciences, and founder of the Darwin Project. His website is www.davidloye.com.

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