



Riane Eisler, [Building Cultures of Peace: Prioritising Partnership Over Domination](#)

We stand at a critical point in human cultural evolution. Going back to the old normal where peace is just an interval between wars is not an option; what we need is a fundamental cultural transformation.

As Einstein said, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them. If we think only in terms of the conventional cultural and economic categories - right vs. left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, capitalist vs. socialist, and so on - we cannot move forward. What we need is to look at social systems from a new perspective that can help us build not only a nuclear-free world but also the better world we so urgently want and need. I believe we must change our underlying social configuration: We must transition from a system of domination to one of partnership.

My Passion and My Work

I was born in Europe, in Vienna, at a time of massive regression to the domination side of the partnership/domination continuum: the rise of the Nazis, first in Germany and then in my native Austria. So from one day to the next, my whole world was rent asunder. My parents and I became hunted, with license to kill. I watched with horror on Crystal Night – so called because of all the glass that was shattered in Jewish homes, businesses, synagogues – as a gang of Gestapo men broke into our home and dragged my father away. As a little girl, I witnessed brutality and violence.

But I also witnessed something else that night that made an equally profound impression on me: what I today call spiritual courage. We've been taught to think of courage as the courage to go out and kill the enemy. But spiritual courage is a much more deeply human courage. It's the courage to stand up against injustice out of love. My mother could have been killed for demanding that my father be given back to her; many people were killed that night. But by a miracle she did obtain my father's release -- yes, some money eventually passed hands, but it would not have happened had she not stood up to the Nazis. So we were able to escape to Cuba, and I grew up in the industrial slums of Havana, because the Nazis confiscated everything my parents owned. And it was there that I learned that most of my family - aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents - were murdered by the Nazis.

These traumatic experiences led me to questions most of us have asked at some time in our lives: Does it have to be this way? Why is there so much injustice, cruelty, violence, and destructiveness, when we humans also have such a great capacity, as I saw in my mother, for

caring, for courage, for love? Is it, as we're often told, inevitable, just human nature? Or are there alternatives -- and if so, what are they?

These questions eventually led to my research. I found very early I simply could not find answers to them in terms of the old social categories (right vs. left, religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, capitalist vs. socialist, and so forth). These categories just look at this or that aspect of a social system, never its fundamental configuration. None of them answer the most critical question for our future: the question of what kinds of beliefs, values, and institutions support our enormous human capacities for caring, for consciousness, for creativity, for sensitivity -- the capacities that are most developed in our species, that make us uniquely human-- and which promote capacities we also have for cruelty, selfishness, and violence. Neuroscience teaches us that we humans are genetically capable of many different kinds of behaviours, but our experiences profoundly affect which of those genetic possibilities are expressed.

Connecting the Dots

I look for patterns, drawing from a large set of data that cuts across cultures and periods of history. It then becomes possible to see social configurations that had not been visible looking at only a part of social systems-- configurations that kept repeating themselves. There were no names for them, so I called one the Domination System and the other the Partnership System.

It is in our primary human relations - within our families and friendships, the relations that are still not taken into account in most analyses of society - that people first learn (on the most basic neural level, as we today know from neuroscience) what is considered normal or abnormal, moral or immoral, possible or impossible.

If children grow up in cultures or subcultures where violence in families is accepted as normal, even moral, what do they learn? The lesson is simple, isn't it? It's that it's OK to use violence to impose one's will on others, both in intimate relationships and international ones.

I want to illustrate this with two cultures. One is Western, the other is Eastern; one is secular, the other religious; one is technologically developed, the other isn't: the Nazis in Germany and the Taliban in Afghanistan. From a conventional perspective, they are totally different. But if you look at these two cultures from the perspective of the partnership/domination continuum, you see a configuration. Both are extremely warlike and authoritarian. And for both, a top priority is returning to a traditional family -- their code word for a rigidly male-dominated, authoritarian, highly punitive family.

Now, this is not coincidental. Nor is it coincidental that these kinds of societies idealize warfare, even consider it holy. Neither is it coincidental that in these kinds of cultures masculinity is equated with domination and violence at the same time that women and anything stereotypically considered feminine, such as caring and nonviolence, are devalued.

I want to emphasize that this has nothing to do with anything inherent in women or men, as we can see today when more and more men are fathering in the nurturing way mothering is

supposed to be done, and women are entering what were once considered strictly male preserves. But these are dominator gender stereotypes that many of us—both men and women—are trying to leave behind.

If we are to build cultures of peace, we have to start talking about something that still makes many people uncomfortable: gender. We might as well put that on the table; people don't want to talk about gender, do they? But let's also remember what the great sociologist Louis Wirth said: that the most important things about a society are those that people are uncomfortable talking about. We saw that with race: Only as we started to talk about it did we begin to move forward. We're beginning to talk more about gender, and starting to move forward, but much too slowly.

This is important for many reasons, including the fact that it is through dominator norms for gender that children learn another important lesson: to equate difference (beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species between female and male) with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated, with being served or serving. And they acquire this mental and emotional map before their brains are fully developed (we know today that our brains don't fully develop until our twenties), so they then can automatically apply it to any other difference, be it a different race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

The Economics of Domination and Partnership

The roles and relations of the two halves of humanity can no longer be considered "just a women's issue" (though we're half of humanity, that phrase again shows how we've been conditioned to devalue women and anything associated with women). In reality, gender roles and relations affect everything about a society from its institutions (for example, whether families are more democratic or authoritarian) to its guiding system of values.

Let me give you an example from economics. Most of us would never think economics has anything to do with gender. At most, we think this refers to the workplace gender discrimination we're finally beginning to talk about. But actually it goes much, much deeper. Economics has huge systemic effects.

Have you ever wondered, for instance, why it is that so many politicians always find money for weapons, for wars, and for prisons, but when it comes to funding health care, child care, and other "soft" or caring activities, they have no money? Nor do they have money for keeping a clean and healthy natural environment -- rather like the "women's work" of keeping a clean and healthy home environment.

Underlying these seemingly irrational priorities is a gendered system of valuations we've inherited from earlier, more domination-oriented times. To meet the challenges we face, we must make this visible.

Neoliberalism is actually a regression to dominator economics: to a top-down economic system where trickle-down economics is really a continuation of dominator traditions, where those on the bottom are socialized to content themselves with the scraps dropping from the opulent tables of those on top.

This is an ancient economics of domination, which transcends labels like capitalism and socialism. Indeed, the two large-scale applications of socialism, the USSR and China, also turned into domination systems, highly authoritarian and violent, with horrendous environmental problems, because the underlying social system did not shift from domination to partnership.

That's not to say we should discard everything from capitalism and socialism. We need to retain and strengthen the partnership elements in both the market and government economies and leave the domination elements behind. But we need to go further to what I have called a "caring economics."

Now, isn't it interesting that when we put "caring" and "economics" in the same sentence, people tend to do a double take? We've been told that caring policies and practices may sound good, but they're just not economically effective. In reality, study after study shows that investing in caring for people and nature is extremely effective -- not only in human and environmental terms, but in purely financial terms.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland suffered from poverty and famine. Today, these nations are invariably in the highest ranks not only of United Nations Human Development Reports but of the World Economic Forum's annual Global Competitiveness reports. This is largely due to the fact that their norm became a more caring economics, a more caring society.

These nations have government-supported childcare, universal healthcare, stipends to help families care for children, elder care with dignity, generous paid parental leave. In short, they economically support caring work in both the market and the household. As a result, they have very long life spans, very low poverty rates, very low crime rates, and a generally high standard of living for all. They are also in the forefront of moving toward sustainable energy and invest a larger proportion of their GDP in helping people in the developing world than other nations.

They are not ideal nations, but they have moved farther than most contemporary nations to the partnership side of the partnership-domination continuum. They have more democracy and equality in both the family and the state. They have been in the forefront of trying to leave behind traditions of violence inherent in domination systems. For example, they pioneered the first peace studies and the first laws prohibiting physical discipline of children in families. And, in contrast to domination systems that subordinate the female half of humanity to the male half, they have a much more equal partnership between women and men. For example, approximately 40 percent of their national legislators are female.

As the status of women rises, men no longer find it such a threat to their status, to their masculinity, to also embrace more caring practices and policies. These nations also have a strong movement to disentangle masculinity from its dominator equation with conquest and violence, including a strong movement for men to take responsibility for violence against women and children.

Between child-battering, wife-beating, sexual abuse of children, rape, bride burnings sexual mutilation of girls and women, so-called honour killings, and other horrors, the number of lives taken and blighted by intimate violence worldwide are much greater than those taken by armed conflict. And yet this violence is still largely invisible.

Our job is to make it visible. If we really want a more peaceful world, we can't just tack that on to a system that idealizes violence as "masculine" and devalues caring and nonviolence as "feminine."

Building Cultures of Equity and Peace

Let's join together and move into that second phase of the peace movement: that integrated phase that takes into account the whole of human relations, from intimate to international. Let us muster the spiritual courage to challenge traditions of domination and violence in our primary human relations – the formative relations between women and men and parents and children.

Let us work for systemic change, for the new norms that will enable a future where all children, both girls and boys, can realize their enormous human potentials for consciousness, creativity, and caring.

Eisler adapted this article for *YES! Magazine*, a national, non-profit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions, from the speech she gave while accepting the Distinguished Peace Leadership Award from the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. Dr. Eisler is a social scientist, attorney, and social activist best known as author of the international bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future and The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. She is president of the Centre for Partnership Studies and is included in the award-winning book *Great Peacemakers*, as one of 20 leaders for world peace, along with Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King. Her website is www.rianeeisler.com

Rianne Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*

<https://web Bruhan.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/eisler-the-chalice-and-the-blade.pdf>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293796516_Review_of_The_Chalice_and_the_Blade_Our_history_our_future

https://centerforpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Jan_Garrett_Chalice-and-the-Blade.pdf

THE CHALICE AND THE BLADE: Our History, Our Future, Riane Eisler. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

Hoke Holcomb

Riane Eisler is a woman with a message, and she delivers it with passion and verve in this synthesis of several areas of scholarship. Her message is that within our history there have

been long periods when cultures functioned as a partnership of members with an ethic of cooperation, nurturing, and support; cultures of the chalice. Over a period of several millennia, these cultures were replaced by invading tribes that operated from a basis of male dominance, power and fear; cultures of the blade. She believes that we have reached a point where we can shape our future by re-establishing partnership cultures.

To establish her case, MS Eisler draws from several areas that are sociological in nature, utilizes current scientific work in the dynamics of change, and introduces her own terminology and cultural transformation theory. Her work would, indeed, be a grand synthesis if she were consistently rigorous in her treatment of these diverse elements, but she is not.

Most of the material is well presented, some is even uplifting, but she falls short of some of her more scholarly goals. Her strongest suit is the summary she gives of several key studies in archaeology. She presents a convincing case that for several millennia BCE there was "a long period of peace and prosperity when ... all the basic technologies on which civilization is built were developed in societies that were not male dominated, violent, and hierarchic." Her foci in the archaeological portion of the work are the cities of Hacilar and Catal Huyuk in what is modern day Turkey, areas in central and southern Europe that are referred to as the Old European culture, and excavations of Minoan sites in Crete. These cultures flourished at different times in the period between about 7,000 BCE and 3,000 BCE. They were primarily Neolithic and agrarian societies, although the Minoan culture extended into the Bronze Age. The subjects of these archaeological studies are brought to life as she describes the activities in cities made up of hundreds and in some cases thousands of people working in harmony. She argues that these cultures "had a well developed religious system that included the worship of goddesses as the primary deities." Associated with this religion of the goddess was a culture characterized by "qualities such as caring, compassion, and nonviolence." There is evidence of division of labour, but not of male dominance. She writes that "there is no evidence of women associated with men in inferior positions," and that "warfare is conspicuous by its absence."

Finally, she proposes that "social relations are primarily based on the principle of linking rather than ranking." After centuries of peace and stability there "appeared on the prehistoric horizon invaders from the peripheral areas of our globe who ushered in a very different form of social organization." After several waves of invasions, these agrarian, partnership societies began to undergo rapid change and the culture in all three areas was replaced by "the warlike, hierarchical, male dominated social structure that is still prevalent."

After establishing the case for the existence of the partnership societies, Eisler makes the following observation: *Yet even when confronted with the authority of new research, with new archaeology, and the corroboration from social science, this truly huge block of new knowledge about millennia of human history so contradicts all we have been taught that its hold on our minds is like a message written in sand.*

She uses the central portion of the book to explain why our new knowledge of these early, peaceful societies is so difficult to retain.

She starts by pointing out that there are innumerable traces of the earlier culture in written history, which are not identified as such. For example, she argues that "the story of Cain and Abel in part reflects the actual confrontation of a pastoral people (symbolized by Abel's offering of his slaughtered sheep) and an agrarian people (symbolized by Cain's offering of 'the fruits of the ground') rejected by the pastoral god Jehovah."

Eisler then shows how all aspects of the cultures of dominance and force became woven into the entire social fabric, for example, the way a deity is originally viewed as an all-powerful woman, then, over a period of time, her husband or son gradually becomes more powerful, and eventually only a remnant, such as the Madonna, is left of the original deity.

Throughout history there were resurgences of the partnership ethic only to be suppressed or co-opted by the prevailing culture. Her treatment of the message of Jesus, and the subsequent alteration of his basic message by a hierarchical church, is particularly strong.

It is difficult to know if *The Chalice and The Blade* should be viewed as a popularization of current research or a scholarly work. Eisler seems to lean toward the latter, and viewed this way the book has several shortcomings.

Archaeological research that does not support her case tends to be minimized and she over-interprets results that do. She also introduces a lot of unnecessary terminology. Her claim that work done in the fields of physics, chemistry, and biology on the dynamics of change is applicable to her more general cultural interpretations is not substantiated in the few pages she gives to this subject.

One can go to other works for a more scholarly approach. Two books that cover much of the same material are: *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* by Marilyn French (Summit Books, New York, 1985), and *The Creation of Patriarchy*, by Gerda Lerner (Oxford University Press, New York, 1986).

The Chalice and the Blade is better viewed as a popularization of current research and a rallying cry for much-needed change. In this light it is a very positive work. It contains a good summation of evidence that there have been partnership societies in the past, and convincing arguments that our knowledge of these societies and attempts to return to them have been systematically and sometimes invisibly suppressed; and it offers hope that we can take an active part in making decisions for a better future.

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Riane Eisler:

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