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A Gender Equal Partnership for Planetary Stewardship **A MAHB Dialogue with Author, Humanist Riane Eisler**

Geoffrey Holland



Sharing our World | Photo courtesy of the author

This is an ongoing Q&A blog series focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship.

One of the world's leading systems scientists and cultural historians, Riane Eisler, shares her perspectives on social organization, partnership and how individual actions can add up to change.

Geoffrey Holland - How did you get on the path that has evolved into your signature partnership cultural model for the world?

Riane Eisler - The passion that I have for this work, and I have a great deal of passion for it, is deeply rooted in my own life, because I was a child refugee along with my parents from the Nazis and the Holocaust. We escaped by a hair's breadth. I was very fortunate that my parents were able to purchase an entry permit to Cuba, one of the few places in the world that, for money, let Jewish refugees in. I grew up in the industrial slums of Havana. It was quite

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traumatic, but it also led to the questions that have animated my research, questions like, does it have to be this way, does there have to be so much violence and cruelty, and, above all, what can we do to change the world for the better? These questions eventually led to my multidisciplinary, whole-systems analysis of human society.

One of my first jobs was with an offshoot of the RAND Corporation, working in what was then a new field, systems analysis. So, when I started to look at society, it was from a whole-systems perspective that differed from conventional analyses: I looked at the whole social system, its totality, including where we all live, in our family and other intimate relations. It is actually very strange that these critical aspects of social systems are not normally included in sociological analyzes, as we know from neuroscience that what children first observe, and experience impacts nothing less than how their brains develop. And of course, this profoundly affects how they feel, think and act, including how they relate to themselves and others.

This whole-systems analysis led to the identification of two new social categories that transcend old ones, such as right or left, religious or secular, Eastern or Western, capitalist or socialist, all of which only describe particular aspects of a society and all pay scant if any attention to the cultural construction of our primary relations: parent-child and gender relations. By contrast, the new social categories of the domination system and the partnership system show the interaction between what happens in our family, gender, and other intimate relations and whether a society is more peaceful or warlike, more equitable and inequitable, truly democratic or authoritarian.

I introduced the domination partnership social scale. No society is a pure domination or partnership society – even societies that fall very close to the domination end of the scale, like Hitler's Germany, or Kim Jong Un's North Korea, or the Taliban, or ISIS. Moreover, and this is a key point, domination or partnership-oriented societies can be Eastern or Western, capitalist or socialist, secular or religious. If we are to build a more equitable, sustainable, and caring world, we urgently need this new way of classifying and understanding our social alternatives.

Male dominance has been a fundamental organizing principle in human society for thousands of years. How did this come to be?

There are many theories about this; some are ridiculous, like the claim that when men discovered that they have a role in paternity they suddenly turned into control-freak brutes. This theory reflects a very low opinion of men. It is not only silly but false. For example, we have images from more partnership-oriented thousand-year old societies such as Catal Huyuk

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(described in my book *The Chalice and the Blade*) that show clearly that these prehistoric people already understood that both women and men have a role in procreation. Another theory is that domination systems began with the introduction of agriculture. And another theory is that domination systems were introduced through wave after wave of intrusions from nomadic pastoralists from the more arid regions in the globe. This is the theory that I subscribe to, at least for the areas around the Mediterranean, which are the areas I focus on in *The Chalice and the Blade*, because we have the most robust archaeological data from them. In these areas the invaders were Indo Europeans. They brought rigid male dominance, top-down chieftain rule, and the institutionalization and idealization of violence, which is how you maintain rigid rankings – be it man over man, man over woman, race over race, etc. Today DNA studies are providing support for this theory.

How have women fared in the domination culture that has shaped the last 5,000 years of our history and society?

Very badly. But the negative impact has not only been on women but on us all. Equating difference – beginning with the difference between the male and female forms of our species – with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving is a core component of domination systems. It's a template for all in-group vs. out-group ranking, whether based on race, religion, sexual orientation, etc. So, in domination cultures or subcultures, whether they are secular or religious, Eastern or Western, leftist or rightist, a top priority is to maintain or re-impose the so-called traditional family – which is really code for a rigidly male-dominated family. In these families, children learn not only ranking male over female, and prejudice against groups that are different, but also that it's very painful to question orders, no matter how unjust.

So the status of women and the cultural construction of gender roles and relations are key social issues, and so is how children are brought up. These matters impact politics, religion, and economics. In my book *The Real Wealth of Nations*, I document how a gendered system of values has distorted economic priorities, so that anything stereotypically associated with women or the “feminine” such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence is devalued. And the “feminine” is devalued also in men, as in labeling men who are “soft” or caring with pejoratives such as “sissy.” To move forward, we have to unpack and leave behind this gendered system of values in which so-called “soft” or “feminine” traits and activities such as caring, caregiving, and nonviolence are systemically devalued.

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The violent exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are common threads that seem to go together. In order to build a human relationship with nature that is life affirming, and sustainable, how important is it to get gender equality correct?

It's of primary importance. This is something I have been trying to make people in the environmental movement aware of. If you look at both capitalist and socialist theory, not only did both come out of early industrial times, and we're now in the post-industrial era, but they came out of more rigidly domination-oriented times. So both Adam Smith and Karl Marx did not consider the work of caring for people "productive," and the same was true of caring for nature. For both, nature was there to be exploited, period. And it's not coincidental that we call nature our Mother Earth, is it? Smith and Marx were trapped in this flawed devaluation of the life giving and life sustaining that is stereotypically associated with women and the feminine. So yes, it is vital that we have gender equity. As the status of women rises, so does the "feminine." We see this around us: along with a higher status of women, a growing number of men find it far less of a threat to their identity, to their "masculinity," to embrace more stereotypically feminine attitudes and activities. Men are today diapering and feeding babies, which is absolutely unmanly according to the gender stereotypes and the ranking of masculine or feminine that's characteristic of domination systems. We've got to start looking at these underlying dynamics if we are going to have the change we know we need.

In the world's developed nations, gender equality has become the ideal, but women are still subjected to shaming for being assertive in their choices of sexual expression. Does this culturally imposed oppression of female sexuality have any basis in nature?

The simple answer is no. If you look at our two closest primate relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, we find that chimps have male dominance, but bonobos do not. And as part of their more partnership-oriented social organization, bonobos are much more peaceful and generally much more egalitarian. My book *Sacred Pleasure* applies the partnership and domination templates to a re-examination of both sexuality and spirituality, and has a great deal about bonobos, as does my new book, *Reclaiming our Humanity*, which is coming out in a few months with Oxford University Press. Yet, until recently, science has ignored these more partnership-oriented primates, instead focusing on the ones that fit the erroneous notion that domination systems are inherent in our "primate nature." We've got to change this.

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Would ‘Dignity for all’ and ‘Shared responsibility for the biosphere’ be worthy fundamentals for what you have termed a partnership structured, sustainable human society?

These ideals are certainly fundamental. But we need more. When I spoke to the United Nations General Assembly a few years ago on a panel on “Harmony with Nature,” I emphasized that you can't just tack on harmony with nature or environmental responsibility, or what you call shared responsibility for the biosphere to a fundamentally imbalanced social system that still has so many of the domination elements we've inherited. We really have to think of whole system change.

What is often called social democracy, as practiced most thoroughly and effectively in the Scandinavian nations, uses public policy to put fundamental human needs first. When embraced as an organizing model, does social democracy offer a worthy design for mending humanity’s relationship with nature?

The term social democracy was actually also used by Hitler to describe his fascist vision. It's very imprecise. What describes the Scandinavian nations much more accurately is that they have moved towards the partnership side of the partnership-domination social scale. First, compared to the rigid top-down control in both family and state characteristic of domination systems, they have much more democratic families as well as government, as is characteristic of a partnership orientation. Secondly, they have moved the closest to gender equity of any contemporary, technologically advanced societies. According to the World Economic Forum's annual Gender Gap Reports, Scandinavian nations have the lowest gender gaps. And this, as well as the accompanying greater social priority for stereotypically feminine traits and values that are so devalued and suppressed in domination systems, is characteristic of a partnership orientation. So, what we find is that Scandinavian societies have invested a great deal of resources in caring for people, starting in early childhood, including generous paid parental leave, good early childhood education, etc. Thirdly, it's no coincidence that these nations are more peaceful societies, and that the first Peace Studies came out of these nations. Nor is it coincidental that they pioneered the first legislation that makes using physical discipline of children in families against the law. This is a configuration we need to become aware of: the partnership rather than domination configuration.

So many feel that the U.S. is on shaky ground. At the moment, we are engaged in a titanic struggle between the domination tradition shaped by greed and intolerance and a

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partnership way shaped by commitment to people and planet. How is this story going to turn out?

I don't have a crystal ball, so I don't know. It really depends on us, all of us. Obviously, I wouldn't be working so hard to accelerate the shift towards partnerships if I didn't believe we have a chance to make things right. But in the last analysis, it depends on what each of us does.

Do you expect women, as equal partners with men, to play a prominent role in shaping a worthy future for humanity and the living biosphere we all depend on?

The answer is a resounding yes, and the good news is that we don't have to start from square one. Never before in recorded history has there been a women's movement, a movement for the human rights of women, that is as widespread and as strong as it is today. (I want to emphasize "recorded history" because, as documented in *The Chalice and the Blade, Sacred Pleasure*, and other works, there is powerful evidence that women were *not* subordinated in our prehistory). So yes, not only do I expect it, but I think it is vital that we go into the future as equal partners with men. And I do not mean matriarchy rather than patriarchy, both terms that keep us trapped in thinking that our only alternative is either dominating or being dominated. The real alternative is partnership.

Humanity has been galvanized globally by the Paris accord on climate change, with the U.S. under the current administration, being the lone outlier. Does the immediate need to aggressively limit greenhouse gases offer a way for citizens from all nations to come together and build a common partnership vision for the future?

It offers that opportunity, but we have to go further and deeper. Being in denial about climate change, as well as denial about a lot of other things such as racism and sexism, is something that happens to the brains of many children who grow up in rigid domination environments. We know this today from neuroscience, that the stresses of these environments have this effect on many children, not all, thank goodness, but many. So, yes, focusing on climate action would be a way to build on a partnership vision. But we have to go deeper into what's causing the misconception and the denial about the climate crisis we're in. And that means changing the "traditional" fear-and-shame based punitive way of raising children that is our heritage from more rigid domination times.

What can each of us do as individuals to be the change we wish for?

We at the Center for Partnership Studies are training people, women and men, to be change agents through our online webinars and online courses, ranging from courses on partnership parenting to caring economics. We base our programs on research showing that both domination systems and partnership systems are supported by four cornerstones: childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and narratives/language. It's no coincidence that a top priority for regressives is maintaining or reinstating a "traditional" family where children learn that abuse and violence by those in power to maintain or impose control is moral. Or that they insist that men are supposed to control women, both individually and collectively. Nor is it coincidental that we have been conditioned to do a double-take when we hear caring and economics in the same sentence, as in the term "caring economics" introduced in my book *The Real Wealth of Nations*. People don't expect that, but if you really think about it, isn't this a terrible comment on how we've been brainwashed to accept that uncaring values should govern economics? Changing this requires looking at our gendered system of values, where caring and caregiving are associated with the "inferior" women and femininity. If we don't look at these underlying dynamics and just focus on surface changes, we can't really move forward. Just look at what's happening under the current U.S. administration: gains we've made are being reversed with the stroke of a pen. Consider "trickle-down economics." That's really about reinstating top-down economic control, where, as in feudal or monarchic domination systems, the bulk of people are to content themselves with the scraps falling from the opulent tables of those on top. Which takes me to the fourth cornerstone: language and narratives. We have to understand that many narratives and language we're used to hearing have to be changed. If we want a better future for ourselves and our children, we have to rebuild these four cornerstones so that they support a partnership rather than domination system.

As for us being the change we wish for, I think that the perfect is the enemy of the good. Of course, we need a fresh understanding of our own attitudes and behaviors, but that does not mean we should hold ourselves to impossible standards, much less point fingers and blame ourselves when we get anxious or fearful and regress to old behavior.

What we need is a new way of thinking that goes beyond secular vs. religious, left vs. right, Eastern vs. Western, socialist vs. capitalist, and so on. Old social categories ignore the impact of childhood and gender relations on how our brains – and hence our beliefs and behaviors – develop. Nor do any of them provide the new economics, narratives, and language to meet the challenges facing our world. The real struggle for our future is between the domination

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configuration and the partnership configuration worldwide. Once we understand this, we can build a solid foundation for a more sustainable, equitable, and caring partnership-oriented world.

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The [MAHB Blog](#) is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org