

Nurturing our Humanity - A MAHB Dialogue with Peace Anthropologist Douglas P. Fry

Geoffrey Holland

Geoff Holland - What is the “domination” paradigm and how has it shaped human history?

Douglas P. Fry - Domination is one end of a broad continuum of social and personal possibilities. The other end is the partnership side of things. With domination, you think of things most of us would call pretty nasty... war, extreme wealth inequities, social classes that are rigidly structured. With domination, a small group of people have most of the wealth, and they dominate other people lower down in the social hierarchy. They tend to use force. Basically, the society promotes structural violence, where the institutions, the politics and the overall social ways of doing things are set up in ways that harm to various degrees the majority of people in the society. Those at the bottom of a social hierarchy are exploited via discrimination, low wages, slavery, even genocide. Domination arose in an anthropological sense relatively recently; within the last 10,000 to 12,000 years or so. Before that, humans lived in nomadic bands, almost exclusively. Domination and the dominance hierarchies were basically non-existent. These bands were small, certainly less than 100 people, sometimes only about 25, and they were not permanent. Picture a lot of these small clusters of humans spread out over a huge area, interconnected with each other by relationships. That began to change when some groups culturally evolved, settling into permanent settlements. With this type of life, you get the development of hierarchies. This huge change began in just a few places on the planet 10,000 to 12,000 years ago or so, just before the beginnings of agriculture. That was the beginning of domination. Around 6,000 years ago, the first states came into existence. These were the first classic civilizations. At that point, you see this rapid acceleration of domination. Not everywhere. There were still plenty of indigenous people living in more of a partnership mode. But in most recent times of colonialism and postcolonialism - everything that's been happening in the last century or two - we see the heavy hand of dominance shaping human existence.

GH - In your new book, *Nurturing Our Humanity*, co-authored with Riane Eisler, you state that “in the course of evolution, humans developed a brain primed more to living in partnership-oriented societies.” If that is so why did “domination” become so central to shaping human history?

DPF – First, I should explain a little bit about the partnership brain and talk about why we're primed for living in partnership. Basically, people were getting along with each other pretty

well in these very early societies. In nomadic band societies, there is this egalitarianism by ethos and behavior across the groups. There's also this gender egalitarianism manifested. To a high degree, you get gender equality. You get people really caring and nurturing each other; looking out for each other's welfare. If you look at the nomadic forager bands, you see a lot of cooperation in terms of child-rearing, where people just take part in this, not just husbands and wives, but more extended family, and just anybody in the band. Across our evolutionary past, more than fighting and aggressing, humans were actually caring for each other and looking out for each other. This is at the deep roots of a partnership type of society. In *Nurturing Our Humanity*, Riane and I go beyond the anthropology of this. We also look at recent neurological studies that show that doing a good deed for somebody actually makes a person feel better. The neurology of the different hormones and brain chemicals have been linked to what makes us feel happy. We're a social species. We like to interact with each other. So, this enabled a great deal of cooperation and compassion. Even in the strongest domination setups, you still have people bucking the system, so to speak, by caring for each other and engaging in altruistic acts. So, it's not an all or none type of situation. Humans clearly have a capacity to be very compassionate, cooperative, and kind. The evidence is in our neurology and is shown by evidence from anthropology, psychology, and other fields. With domination in social organization, you get those that can monopolize wealth, gain power, and start exploiting others. So that's the key variable that happened relatively recently. Arising with the first chiefdoms, you have somebody at the top of a social hierarchy who is telling others what to do. This domination trend continues with the origin of the first states and the development of very strong central governments and rigid social hierarchies, whether they're religious hierarchies or social political ones. That's really what we're facing today at different levels in many different societies.

GH - How is domination linked to the historically entrenched oppression of women?

DPF – As an undergraduate student, I had a professor, M Kay Martin. She co-authored a book titled, *Female of the Species*. This goes back to 1975. What that book showed was that the status of women is very much linked to the type of social organization they live in. With nomadic forager bands, men and women are basically of equal status and nobody bosses anybody else around, or if they do, it's purely an interpersonal attempt to control somebody. It's not set into the social structure. That book showed, based on a large cross-cultural sample, that you had patriarchy coming in along with agriculture. That was the beginning of the end for equal status. When men made more important contributions to the household through planting and harvesting, they basically came to dominate women. This has occurred across various societies over time since the beginning of agriculture. I did my own research, some years ago, in Oaxaca, Mexico. I was interested in how children learn to be violent versus how they learn to be more peaceful. I found that in two neighboring Zapotec communities in the

Valley of Oaxaca, one place was much more aggressive than the other. After two years of fieldwork, I found that, in the aggressive place, women contributed very little to the household income in comparison to the men. This difference in earning capacity had been going on for a long time. The men were the ones that had been working in the mines and bringing in wages. In that circumstance, and not coincidentally, the women were sometimes beaten by their husbands. Wife-beating was culturally accepted in that community. However, aggression towards women and their status overall was very different in the neighboring Zapotec community, which was notably more peaceful and egalitarian. And I use the term *La Paz* (peace in Spanish) to refer to the other community and to reflect on what was going on there. The Spanish had arrived over 400 years before and had set up *La Paz* to be a pottery producing village. Significantly, the women were the potters. So over time, before there was a cash economy, women contributed to the household income by making their pots and trading them. Once monetary currency was introduced, women brought money into their households. The *La Paz* men appreciate this longstanding skill and economic contribution of the women. The different statuses of the sexes in those two communities, which are literally an hour and 15-minute walk from each other, is remarkable. Economic contributions are important when you think about the relative statuses of men and women. When you have a modern country, where women are involved in the economic system, and the political system, and women have some sort of democratic representation, then you can see the rebirth of this egalitarianism between men and women. That's partnership thinking. That's really where we need to go and develop further around the planet.

GH - How does domination drive the relentless exploitation of nature?

DPF - One of the things we could have done more explicitly in the book is to have had more on the environment and how domination and partnership tend to perceive and treat the environment differently. But the key point is just like with social domination wherein some people view themselves as superior to others, the same view of superiority over nature, as opposed to humans being a part of nature, tends to be manifested in domination systems. The domination of humans over animals is taken for granted; for example, animals are here to be hunted and exploited. Animals are here to be killed if they're in our way; clear the forest, kill off the species, even at our own peril as people with a domination ethos fail to grasp the interdependence and complex web of interactions in life-sustaining ecosystems. We're seeing domination wreaking havoc with the environment at an alarming rate right now. This is a true crisis spurred onward by a domination orientation. Species are disappearing. That's the result of a domination orientation toward the natural world. Many indigenous cultures have cosmologies, where humans, animals, and nature are seen as essential interwoven parts of a system. So, if you think about where we need to go on this planet today, we must realize that the world ecosystem is in jeopardy, and we can no longer go forward with a domination view

where the resources are just there to for us to extract, every river is a toilet, and the ocean a cesspool. Partnership is about living in balance. What about the animal rights for squirrels living in the backyard or bears living in the forest? This springs from a partnership type of thinking. Many cultures already have his orientation.

GH - What are the costs that go with domination?

DPF - There are societal costs and certainly personal costs. If we go to the question of war, slavery, genocide, abuse at that level, huge harm takes place in domination systems. They are spoiling the natural world for everyone, humans and non-humans. There's also a lack of compassion for people. There's been a lot of discussion this election year about universal health care. We're just so behind in this country—behind the European countries, Canada, New Zealand, Australia. These other nations understand the importance of equality in access to health care. That's how they want their societies to be, and this reflects a caring partnership view. In the United States, the medical establishment is set up in such a way that it is causing great harm because many people don't have access to health care. The whole system is set up to harm some rather than to care for all. Another huge harm of a domination system is how we care or not care for children, how we let many children go hungry and uneducated. Too often, these individuals who grow up inadequately cared for fall into a domination type of structural violence. This is another harm that we discuss in *Nurturing Our Humanity* in terms of the long term psychological effects, and physiological effects that occur as the brain develops. The number of harsh and harmful effects of the domination society are legion, and they can span across an individual's lifetime. Longitudinal research shows that the greater the number of adverse experiences that occur in a child's developing life, the higher the chance that the person will develop serious illnesses, drug addiction, alcoholism, depression, and early death. These are all effects of an early environment that's set up in a domination fashion, where people's needs are not met, where their wellbeing is not given value. The opposite side of this are the benefits of the partnership way wherein the health and wellbeing of children is prioritized with the result that people are healthier and happier across their lifespans. We see societies as being spread out on a continuum, with domination and partnership at opposite ends. Almost everything I listed as negatives of domination, by contrast, would be minimized or absent within partnership systems.

GH - The Northern European nations - Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland - are considered consistently ranked highest for living standards and quality of life. They are all considered social democracies. How is that form of governance a reflection of the partnership way?

DPF - I spent 19 years living in Finland and have traveled in Denmark and Sweden. If one looks at the Nordic nations, the four you just listed plus Iceland, these five countries have not been

at war with each other in any combination for over 200 years. There are interesting elements to this history. Sweden and Norway had what they call a *non-war*. Norway used to be part of Sweden. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was some tension. Norway wanted to be independent. Troops lined up on the border, but they did not start shooting. They dealt with the crisis diplomatically. So, that was the first Nordic non-war. These countries are not inherently pacifist, but they've had a shift in values over the last couple of centuries. They also have a high level of shared identity, where they understand that they are part of this larger Nordic system, sometimes called Norden. These countries have similar histories, similar values, though they do speak different languages. They've all oriented towards a partnership way of functioning over stages of recent history. Women and men have an equal place in these countries. I'll speak about Finland because I lived there for almost two decades. In Finland, there's a strong tradition of women and men working together on the farm and respecting each other. The tasks were different, but the cooperation was substantial between males and females. Finland was the second country in the world, after New Zealand, to grant women the vote. At the same time, women earned the right to run for political office. In the first election, 17 women were elected to Parliament. The tradition has just gone forward from there in terms of women having political clout. Finland currently has a female Prime Minister, Sanna Marin. The Parliaments in all these Nordic countries have a high percentage of women members. This encourages a partnership model because men will come along and understand the benefits of partnership, but often it's the women who take the lead in implementing partnership values, practices, and policies that favor equality, caring, and wellbeing for all members of society, regardless of a person's political leanings, wealth, age, gender, ethnicity, and so on.

GH - What are the four cornerstones of a partnership future?

DPF - The first is to focus on children, and applying partnership values to children, for their care, for their nutrition, for their health, for their psychological growth and well-being. The second cornerstone is to make sure women are receiving equal opportunities in education, access to health care, equal pay for equal work, correcting at past inequities that may still exist, for instance, regarding child-rearing, child care, care for the elderly, all tasks that are expected to be done by women, without monetary compensation. A third cornerstone focuses on the economic system in a society, and how it can shift from a few people controlling almost all of the wealth, and exploiting their advantages economically, to a partnership system, where you have a much more equal distribution of the wealth. Ultimately, you want the wealth to be pretty fairly distributed across society. If you look at the United States, for instance, what's the difference between the average pay of a worker and the CEO. It's several hundred times larger for the CEO on average in the United States. In contrast, if you look at some of the Nordic countries, the difference in pay tends to be less than 100 times. Nordic

CEOs do get paid more than the average workers, but the extent of this disparity is much less in Nordic countries than in the States. The fourth cornerstone is to really think in terms of radically new narratives. It takes a concerted effort to change our cultural narratives, from nursery rhymes to cartoons, to Hollywood movies. We need to stop promoting domination. We need to send cultural signals that encourage a partnership narrative.

GH - For millennia, humans have been the dominant life form on Earth. The evidence suggests we are guilty of massive, unrelenting overreach. The biosphere is being stressed by a perfect storm of human-driven existential threats. Is *Nurturing Our Humanity* telling us the partnership way is the only worthy way forward?

DPF - Yes. You've nailed it with that question. One of the central reasons that I teamed up with Riane Eisler to do this book is because we see it as so critically important. Riane has come up with this wonderful way of conceptualizing things in terms of domination and partnership. She calls it a cultural transformation theory. It's easy to understand, and it's really important. We have to radically and quickly change our direction as people living on the same shared planet, and adopt totally different ways of behaving and thinking. We're in deep doo-doo, as they say, if we don't.

GH - What steps can we as individuals take to encourage a planetary scale cultural transformation that delivers dignity for all and responsible stewardship of the biosphere that we all depend on?

DPF - I have a number of thoughts on that one. There's so much common ground. People everywhere need to feel safe and secure. We need to work for peace. Generally speaking, social change occurs through some sort of gradation of steps. We don't have a whole lot of time to work on the climate crisis and a whole host of other existential issues. We've got to fully engage now. I'm hoping we reach a critical mass of awareness and caring so that we can then push forward cooperatively with a common plan. We need a vision for creating that alternate partnership narrative. This very much dovetails with the content and message of *Nurturing Our Humanity*: that humanity urgently needs to change our narrative to one that encourages and promotes partnership for our common human survival and wellbeing. The importance of vision cannot be underestimated. We need to nurture a vision that's partnership oriented, cooperation oriented. When people understand that they're interdependent, their fates are linked, they're much more inclined to cooperate with each other. The simple idea is that all humans on the planet share this biosphere; that we're totally interdependent around the globe; that there is only one home planet; that to survive and flourish we have to cooperate. If we want to assure our wellbeing and our future, we simply

must work together. In short, we must stifle the 'Us versus Them' narrative and instead follow a partnership path.

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