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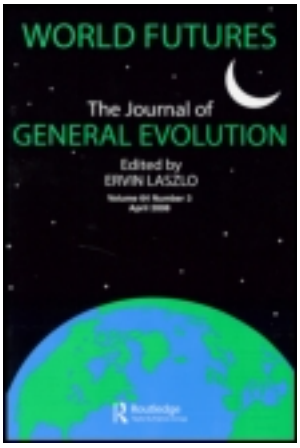


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# Human Possibilities: An Integrated Systems Approach

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# HUMAN POSSIBILITIES: AN INTEGRATED SYSTEMS APPROACH

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A basic principle of systems theory is that if we do not look at the whole of a system, we cannot see the connections between its various components. This article describes the author's personal and research journey developing a new method of inquiry and a new theory of cultural evolution that takes into account the whole of our history (including prehistory), the whole of our species (both its male and female halves), and the whole of social relations (from politics and economics to family and other intimate relations). It reveals connections and patterns not visible using smaller data bases and casts a new, more hopeful, light on our past, present, and the possibilities for our future.

*KEYWORDS: Bioculturalism, childhood, continuum, cultural transformation, domination model, economics, family, hierarchies of actualization, hierarchies of domination, human nature, gender, partnership model, relational dynamics, religion, self-organization*

My interest in social systems is not only intellectual. It is rooted in my early life experiences. On November 10, 1938—later known as Crystal Night because so much glass was shattered in Jewish stores, homes, and synagogues—a gang of Nazis came for my father, shoved him down the stairs, and dragged him off. Miraculously, my mother obtained his release, and my parents and I fled my native Vienna to Paris, and from there to Cuba. Had we remained in Europe, we would almost certainly have been killed, as were most of our relatives.

These childhood experiences led to burning questions. Why is there so much cruelty, destructiveness, and hate in the world? Is this our inevitable lot? Or can we create a more peaceful, just, and caring world?

As I grew up, I looked for answers to these questions in books and universities, but I never found satisfactory ones. Then I took a job as a social scientist at the Systems Development Corporation, an offshoot of the RAND Corporation. I did not like the work because my employers were only interested in military systems. But I learned a basic principle of systems thinking: that looking at how different parts of a system interact makes it possible to see more than just the sum of the system's parts.

I was not aware at that time that studying social systems would become my life's work. That was in the 1950s, and many things happened before I returned

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to the fundamental questions I had never answered. By the time I did, it was the 1970s. Like many of us, I saw that the growing global crises futurists then called the *world problematique* cannot be solved by the system that created them. At our level of technological development, violence to settle international disputes is not sustainable. Neither is the once hallowed "conquest of nature" sustainable at a time when advanced technologies are causing environmental damage of unprecedented magnitude. I saw that a grim future awaits my children—and all of us—unless there are transformative social changes.

But transformation to what? Can we really construct a social system that supports more just, balanced, and peaceful relationships? If so, what does such a system look like? And how can we accelerate the shift to this type of social system worldwide?

As I embarked on my systematic analysis of human societies, I developed the *study of relational dynamics*. This is a method of inquiry that differs markedly from traditional studies of society. To begin with, it draws from a much wider data base. Conventional studies, including most systems studies, focus on politics and economics. The study or relational dynamics looks at the *whole* of our lives—including our family and other intimate relations. Unlike the majority of studies (often aptly called "the study of man"), this method takes into account the *whole* of humanity—both its female and male halves. And rather than examining one period at a time, it looks at the *whole* span of history—including the long period before written records called prehistory.

A basic principle of systems theory is that if we do not look at the whole of a system, we cannot see the connections between its various components—just as if we look at only part of a picture, we cannot see the relationship between its different parts. Using the more complete data base of the study of relational dynamics makes it possible to see connections between different parts of social systems that are not visible otherwise.

Some connections I recognized from earlier studies, such as the work of psychologists documenting the connection between the family backgrounds of "authoritarian" versus "democratic" personalities and religious and racial prejudice, as well as the writings of feminist scholars on the link between social violence and a male socialization for conquest and domination. But I also saw larger patterns that had not been identified within the scope of modern science—patterns that began to answer my questions about viable alternatives to chronic violence, insensitivity, and suffering.

With these patterns in mind, I gradually developed the theoretical strands of *human possibilities theory*. The first strand, drawing from a re-examination of human cultural evolution, is the *cultural transformation theory* introduced in my book *The Chalice and the Blade* and other works (Eisler 1987, 1995, 2000, 2002, 2007). The most recent strand, drawing from a re-examination of human biological evolution and new findings from neuroscience, is what I call *bio-culturalism*.[1] Together, these strands provide an integrative conceptual framework for understanding the interactive relationship between biology, culture, and human agency.

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## FROM CONVENTIONAL CATEGORIES TO HOLISTIC FRAMEWORKS

Like systems, chaos, evolution, and complexity theory, human possibilities theory recognizes that, like other living systems, a cultural system is not a static entity. It is a human-made, self-organizing, self-maintaining, and self constructing network of component-producing processes.[2] That is, a cultural system maintains itself through the interaction of key components that together maintain and regenerate the culture's basic character.[3]

My first challenge therefore was to identify the key components of cultural systems. It soon became clear that conventional social categories, such as ancient/modern, Eastern/Western, religious/secular, rightist/leftist, technologically developed/undeveloped, and capitalist/communist are not useful in this regard.

Religious/secular, Eastern/Western, and ancient/modern are shorthand for ideological, geographic, and time differences. Right/left and liberal/conservative describe political orientations. Industrial, pre-industrial, and post-industrial describe levels of technological development. Capitalism and communism are labels for different economic systems. Democratic/authoritarian describe political systems in which there are, or are not, elections.[4]

In short, none of these categories take into account the totality of the institutions, assumptions, beliefs, relationships, and activities that constitute a culture. Indeed, these conventional social categories do not even take into account the cultural construction of the primary human relations: the formative childhood relations and the relations between the male and female halves of humanity—even though these relations are basic to our species' survival and to what children learn to view as normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, moral or immoral.[5]

Because the quality of the relations a child experiences and observes plays a critical role in the development of nothing less than the human brain, we need categories that take into account the cultural construction of parent–child relations. Because we are a dimorphic species, we need classifications that take into account the cultural construction of the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity. Because people spend most of their lives in the day-to-day relations of family, school, and local community, we need categories that include what happens in the private sphere as well as the larger public political and economic sphere. And because our problems—personal, political, economic, and ecological—revolve around how we relate to ourselves, others, and the Earth, we need social classifications that show what kinds of relations a culture supports or inhibits, be it in families or in the family of nations.

With these matters in mind, my second challenge was to search for patterns, cross-culturally and historically. Using the large data base described above, what gradually became apparent were social configurations that repeat themselves cross-culturally and historically—configurations that are not visible through the fragmenting lenses of old social categories.

There were no names for these social configurations. So I called one the *domination model* and the other the *partnership model*.

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The partnership model and the domination model are self-organizing and nonlinear. They describe mutually supporting interactions of key systems components that maintain a particular systems configuration.

These interactions establish and maintain two very different types of relations—from intimate to international. One type is based on rigid rankings of domination ultimately backed up by fear and force. The other type is based on mutual respect, mutual accountability, and mutual benefit.

No society orients completely to either the domination model or the partnership model. This is why I called this new integrated conceptual framework for the analysis of cultures the *partnership/domination continuum*. And what I found is that the degree to which a society or time period orients to either end of this continuum profoundly affects which of our large repertoire of human traits and behaviors is culturally reinforced or inhibited.

## THE PARTNERSHIP/DOMINATION CONTINUUM

The interaction of the core elements of the domination model and the partnership model can best be understood in terms of systems self-organization theory. This is not a matter of linear causes and effects, but of continual interactions between the core elements of the system.

We see this if we look at some of the most brutally violent, repressive societies of the twentieth century: Hitler's Germany (a technologically advanced, Western, rightist society), Stalin's USSR (a secular leftist society), Khomeini's Iran (an Eastern religious society), and Idi Amin's Uganda (a tribalist society). There are obvious differences between these cultures. But they all share the core configuration of the domination model.

The first component of the core domination configuration is a structure of rigid top-down rankings: hierarchies of domination maintained through physical, psychological, and economic control. This structure is found in both the family and the state or tribe, and is the template or mold for all social institutions.

The second core component is the rigid ranking of one half of humanity over the other half. Theoretically, this could be the female half over the male half. But historically, it has been the ranking of the male half over the female half. Along with this ranking of male over female, we see the higher valuing of "hard" qualities and behaviors, such as "heroic" violence and "manly" conquest and control. I want to emphasize that these are *not* qualities inherent in men but rather qualities stereotypically associated with "real masculinity" in domination ideology.

The third core component of the domination model is culturally accepted abuse and violence, from child and wife beating to chronic warfare. Every society has some abuse and violence. But in cultures orienting to the domination model, we find the institutionalization and even idealization of abuse and violence to maintain hierarchies of domination—man over woman, man over man, race over race, religion over religions, tribe over tribe, nation over nation.

The fourth core component consists of beliefs that relations of domination and submission (beginning with the domination of male over female) are inevitable, normal, and even moral. Hence, in cultures and subcultures that orient closely

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to the domination model, we find teachings and stories that it is honorable and moral to kill and enslave neighboring nations or tribes, stone women to death, stand by while "inferior" races are put in ovens and gassed, or beat children to impose one's will. In this belief system, there are only two options. You either dominate or you are dominated. Therefore, both war and the "war of the sexes" are inevitable. The guiding belief is that there is no other alternative.

The partnership model has a very different core configuration. The basic template of this model also consists of four interactive, mutually supporting components.

The first core component is a democratic and egalitarian structure. This structure is found in both the family and the state or tribe, and is the template for other institutions. That is not to say that there are no rankings. But they are what I call *hierarchies of actualization* rather than *hierarchies of domination*. These are more flexible hierarchies in which power is viewed not as power *over* but as power *to* and power *with*: the kind of power described in the progressive management literature today as empowering rather than disempowering, as inspiring and supporting rather than controlling.

The second core component is equal partnership between women and men. With this comes a high valuing, in *both* women and men, of qualities and behaviors such as nonviolence, nurturance, and caregiving—qualities denigrated as "soft," feminine," and "unmanly" in the domination model.

The third core component of the partnership model is that abuse and violence is not culturally accepted. This doesn't mean that there is no abuse or violence. But they do not have to be institutionalized or idealized because they are not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination.

The fourth core component consists of beliefs about human nature that support empathic and mutually respectful relations. Although cruelty and violence are recognized as human possibilities, they are not considered inevitable and normal, much less moral.

Cultures that orient to the partnership end of the partnership/domination continuum also transcend conventional categories such as religious or secular, Eastern or Western, industrial, pre-industrial, or post-industrial, and so on. Contemporary examples include tribal societies as well as pre-industrial and technologically advanced nations.

For example, the forest Teduray, as anthropologist Stuart Schlegel writes, can best be described as a partnership society. He writes: "I used to call them 'radically egalitarian.' But . . . they have the core configuration characteristic of the partnership model: they are generally egalitarian, women and men have equal status, and they are peaceful." In describing his fieldwork among the Teduray, Schlegel (1998, 244) further writes: "Family and social structure were egalitarian and social relations unranked and peaceful. Decision-making was typically participatory; softer, stereotypically 'feminine' virtues were valued; and community well-being was the principal motivation for work and other activities. Nature and the human body were given great respect. The emphasis on technology was on enhancing and sustaining life" (244).

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The agrarian Minagkabau also orient to the partnership model. The Minagkabau are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Sumatran archipelago, numbering about four million people. As among the Teduray, here women play major social roles, violence is not part of Minagkabau childraising, and stereotypically feminine values such as caring and nurturing are valued—not only in women but also in men. In contrast to more domination-oriented ideologies, in the Minagkabau belief system nurture is a basic principle of nature.

As the anthropologist Peggy Sanday reports,

> The Minagkabau weave order out of their version of wild nature by appeal to maternal archetypes. Unlike Darwin in the 19th century, the Minagkabau subordinate male dominion and competition, which we consider basic to human social ordering and evolution, to the work of maternal nurture, which they hold to be necessary for the common good and the healthy society. . . . Social well-being is found in natural growth and fertility according to the dictum that the unfurling, blooming, and growth in nature is our teacher. (2002, 22–24)

As among the Teduray, among the Minagkabau mediation for violence prevention and non-escalation have been developed to encourage a peaceable way of life. Sanday writes: "Childcare is not authoritarian or punitive. I have never seen any child hit or even slapped. . . . The socialization techniques fit what one would expect from the peacefulness of Minagkabau interpersonal relations."[6]

Over that last several centuries, especially in technologically developed, industrialized Western countries, there has been movement toward the partnership end of the continuum. And this orientation to the partnership configuration is today most clearly visible in Nordic societies such as Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Norway.

## THE NORDIC EXPERIENCE

These Nordic nations are not ideal societies. But they are democratic cultures where there are not huge gaps between haves and have-nots, where women have higher status, and where nurturance and nonviolence are considered appropriate behavior for men as well as women and are supported by fiscal policy.

These countries have a successful mix of free enterprise and central planning. They were the first nations to move toward more industrial democracy, pioneering teamwork by self-directed groups to replace assembly lines where workers are mere cogs in the industrial machine. They have low poverty rates, low crime rates, and have succeeded in creating a generally good living standard for all.

This success has sometimes been attributed to the fact that these nations are relatively small and homogeneous. But smaller and even more homogeneous societies, such as some of the oil-rich nations of the Middle East where there are large gaps between haves and have-nots, orient closely to the domination model. So to understand why the Nordic nations developed a more caring and equitable economics we have to look at other factors.

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**Table 1**
**The Domination System and the Partnership System**

| Component | Domination System | Partnership System |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Structure | Authoritarian structure of ranking and *hierarchies of domination* in *both* family and state or tribe. | Democratic structure of linking and *hierarchies of actualization* in *both* family and state or tribe. |
| 2. Gender | Ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, as well as rigid gender stereotypes, with traits and activities viewed as masculine, such as "toughness" and conquest, ranked over those seen as feminine, such as "softness" and caregiving. | Equal valuing of the male and female halves of humanity, as well as fluid gender roles with a high valuing of empathy, caring, caregiving, and nonviolence in both women and men, as well as in social and economic policy. |
| 3. Relations | High degree of fear, abuse, and violence ranging from child and wife beating to other forms of abuse by "superiors" in families, workplaces, and society. Children grow up in punitive, authoritarian, male-dominated families where they observe and experience inequality and inequity as the accepted norm. | Mutual respect and trust with a low degree of fear, abuse, and violence, since they are not required to maintain rigid rankings of domination. Children grow up in families where parenting is authoritative rather than authoritarian and adult relations are egalitarian and equitable. |
| 4. Beliefs | Beliefs and stories that justify and idealize domination and violence, which are presented as inevitable, moral, and desirable. | Beliefs and stories that give high value to empathic, mutually beneficial, nonviolent relations, which are considered moral and desirable. |

Adapted from Riane Eisler, *The Power of Partnership,* New World Library, 2002.

One important factor is that in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland there is much greater partnership between women and men in both the family and the state. Women have in the Nordic world held the highest political offices, and a larger proportion of legislators (approximately 40 percent) are female than anywhere else in the world.

As among the Teduray and Minagkabau, the higher status of women in the Nordic world has important consequences for how men define masculinity. As the status of women rises, so also does the status of traits and activities that are in domination-oriented cultures unacceptable in men because they are stereotypically associated with "inferior" femininity. These traits become more highly valued in, and by, both men and women. So along with the higher status of women in the Nordic world, came fiscal priorities that support more stereotypically "feminine" values and activities. These more partnership-oriented nations pioneered caring policies such as government-supported childcare, universal healthcare, and paid parental leave.

As a result of these more stereotypically "feminine" caring policies, countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway, which earlier suffered from extreme poverty—including severe famines that led to waves of immigration to the United

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States—became prosperous. This contradicts still another reason sometimes given for more humane Nordic social policies: that these policies were due to greater prosperity. As Hilkka Pietila documents, in reality, these policies were the cause, not effect, of greater prosperity (2001; Eisler 2007).

Nordic nations also pioneered laws prohibiting violence against children in families. They have a strong men's movement against male violence toward women. They pioneered nonviolent conflict resolution, establishing the first peace studies programs when the rest of the world only had war academies. In other words, in conformity with the partnership configuration, they have worked hard to leave behind entrenched traditions of violence in both intimate and international relations.

In addition, Nordic nations pioneered environmentally sound manufacturing approaches. For example, the "Natural Step," where materials are recycled even after they reach the consumer to avoid pollution and waste, came out of Sweden. These nations also contribute a larger percentage of their annual gross domestic product to international programs working for economic development, environmental protection, and human rights than other developed nations—a fact that frontally contradicts the notion that these nations are more caring because of their homogeneity, since their large investment in the developing world is to benefit people who are very different from them.

These are *not* coincidental developments. They are all outcomes of the fact that the core configuration of the Nordic world orients more to the partnership model rather than domination model.

But without the analytical lens of the partnership–domination continuum, the patterns I just described seem random and disconnected. Indeed, looked at through the lenses of conventional social categories, we cannot even see these patterns, as we lack the conceptual framework to analyze the dynamics of the core components that interact to form the domination model and the partnership model as two underlying possibilities for structuring societies.

## BUILDING A NEW THEORY

Human possibilities theory examines a large field of complex interactions, but simplifies these by focusing on core systems dynamics. It examines the complex interactions between four key interactive relationships:

1. The interactive relationship between biology and culture;
2. The interactive relationship of the core elements of a culture;
3. The interactive relationship between cultural beliefs and institutions and different kinds of human experiences, behaviors, and relationships;
4. The interactive relationship of all the above.

Human possibilities theory proposes that the conflict between the partnership model and the domination model as two basic ways of structuring institutions, beliefs, and behaviors underlies human cultural evolution. It further proposes that by examining this conflict we can more effectively predict the outcome of different

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personal and cultural choices. Most importantly, we can more effectively intervene in our personal and collective futures.

In constructing human possibilities theory, I was influenced by the whole family of new theories variously known as systems, cybernetic, chaos, evolutionary, and complexity theories. Some of my theory-building draws from these theories, some of it parallels them, and some of it expands them by focusing on matters that are not included in them.

My work also draws from other new scholarly strands, including gender and women's studies. And it draws from both new and early research in both biological and social science in its focus on the interaction between biology and culture and between genes, cultures, and individual beliefs and behaviors.

But human possibilities theory provides a new connectivity to some of the insights advanced by earlier scholars by offering the new, more inclusive conceptual framework of the partnership/domination continuum as well as cultural transformation theory and bio-culturalism. It also takes findings from neuroscience, which have largely focused on individuals, and applies them to cultures.

The premise of human possibilities theory that biology has to be considered in studying humanity is certainly not new; it goes back to Charles Darwin, and earlier evolutionary studies. The premise that culture plays a major role in how humans view the world and live in it is also not new. It is the basis of sociology, of classic works such as those of Emile Durkheim, Wilfredo Pareto, Max Weber, Pitirim Sorokin, Karl Marx, and other notable figures in the field. Anthropological studies such as those of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Geoffrey Gorer have also contributed to our understanding that cultural variations are reflected in people's beliefs and actions.

Also not new is the idea key to human possibilities theory that early childhood experiences profoundly affect how we see the world and live in. This is an insight widely discussed and documented in psychological literature, and was foundational to the works of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, and other pioneers in the field. The more recent work of neuroscientists such as Bruce Perry, Debra Niehoff, Steven Quartz, and Terrence Sejnowski verify this on a biological level.

The tenet that the social construction of the roles and relations of women and men is a key component of culture is also not new. This has been discussed and documented by many feminist scholars, from Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to belle hooks, Kate Millett, and Susan Moller Okin. Anthropologist such as Peggy Sanday and Stuart Schlegel and cultural historians such as Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz have focused on the connection between culture and the status of women, and social psychologists such as Wilhelm Reich and cultural geographers such as James DeMeo have examined the connection between the cultural construction of sexuality and the totality of a culture's worldview and institutions.

Evolutionary systems thinkers such as Sally Goerner, David Loye, and John O'Manique have in recent years also advanced theories connecting biological evolution and cultural evolution, with insights that in key ways parallel those advanced by the bio-culturalism proposed by human possibilities theory. Other

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evolutionary systems theorists such as Ervin Laszlo, Allan Combs, Bruce Weber, David Depew, and Ken Wilber have also made important contributions to a more systemic approach to evolution.

The intent of human possibilities theory is not to compete with any of these theories. It is to complement them. I emphasize this because one of the characteristics of contemporary science is its intense competitiveness, which along with the compartmentalization and fragmentation of the modern academy, has made it difficult to bring together diverse insights into a more inclusive and integrated explanatory whole.

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## TOWARD A UNIFIED THEORY OF EVOLUTION

In searching for an inclusive explanatory whole, I not only reexamined cultural evolution but also biological evolution. Here too I was influenced by new theoretical approaches. In the 1980s a number of international scholars came together in a new group that called itself the General Evolution Research Group (GERG). We spanned many disciplines, from astrophysics, chemistry, and biology to sociology, social psychology, and history. My husband, social psychologist and evolutionary theorist, David Loye, and I were two of the co-founders of this group, which was largely inspired by the systems philosopher Ervin Laszlo. It later expanded to include Ilya Prigogine and other leaders in what is sometimes called the new science.

One of our aims was to re-examine evolution from the perspective of general systems theory. We were not proposing any ultimate causality but rather that evolution is a self-organizing process that can be better understood by transcending the conventional fragmented approach to the study of evolution focusing on the history of particular species.

Today, the principle of self-organization is increasingly recognized in the natural sciences. Examples are the theories about how chemical systems maintain themselves or are transformed at critical bifurcations points advanced by Ilya Prigogine and Isable Stengers (chaos theory) and the biological and evolutionary theories of Humberto Maturana (autopoiesis) and Vilmos Csanyi (autogenesis).

This principle also operates in the living systems we call societies. However, principles from the natural sciences cannot be exported wholesale into the social sciences. There are some isomorphisms between different levels of evolution. But at each new level of evolution, new governing dynamics emerge.[7]

This does not mean that older processes are no longer operant. When life appeared on our planet, physical processes still operated. But now they interacted with newer biological processes. With the emergence of our species, another level of evolutionary dynamics emerged. Consequently, what happens at the human level cannot, as has been proposed by many earlier evolutionary scientists, just be reduced to the principles of natural selection and sexual selection. Although human cultures are living systems in which chemical and biological processes are operant, a whole host of additional processes come into play at the human level.

Charles Darwin, as well as Theodosius Dobzhansky, Julian Huxley, and Ernst Mayr, three of the prime architects of the neo-Darwinian synthesis, all emphasized that human evolution transcends prior evolutionary dynamics. Dobzhansky specifically emphasized the importance of culture in human affairs. He wrote, "The most significant product, and the paramount determining factor, of human evolution is culture" and "culture is not transmitted biologically through some special genes; it is acquired anew in every generation by learning and instruction, in large part through the medium of the symbolic language" (1968, 236).

These are also basic premises of the bio-culturalism I propose. Bio-culturalism posits that in studying human behaviors, we have to take into account the interaction between genes and experiences as influenced by our environments—and that the most important environments for humans at this point in our evolution are our cultural environments. In other words, our human experiences are largely molded by our cultures.

Certainly all human behaviors, including our great capacity for learning, have a biological base. But we humans have a very large behavioral repertoire. Insensitivity, cruelty, violence, and destructiveness are human possibilities. And so also are consciousness, empathy, caring, and creativity. If they were not, we would not be capable of them. And both of these different sets of capacities are part of our biological repertoire, which developed in the course of evolution.

In this sense, sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists are right in arguing that we need to take biology into account to understand human behavior and human society. But they are not right in claiming that our behaviors today are the result of millennia-old evolutionary imperatives that inexorably drive us to violence and domination.

As Loye writes, to understand and advance the evolution of our species we need a fully human theory of evolution (2003; 2010). Rather than being puppets of highly specialized preprogrammed brain circuits, we are driven by a complex combination of motivations, ranging from survival and reproduction to our needs for self-expression, love, meaning, and self-actualization.

My new book in progress with the working title of *Human Possibilities* analyzes the expression of these motivations in the context of cultural environments orienting primarily to the domination model or to the partnership model. It proposes that our brain neurochemistry is to a large extent the product not of ancient evolutionary imperatives but of adaptations to different environments—and that the environments of cultures orienting to the domination model or the partnership model support the development and maintenance of different neurochemical patterns.

In other words, I am proposing that the issue is what *conditions* lead to the expression, or inhibition, of different aspects of our large and varied human biological repertoire. Even more specifically, the issue is what conditions lead to the expression or inhibition of our great human capacity for caring and creativity or, alternately, for cruelty and destructiveness. And addressing this issue requires studying both biological and cultural evolution from a new systemic perspective.

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## EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF SYSTEMS ANALYSES

As I mentioned earlier, a distinguishing feature of the study of relational dynamics is that it takes into account the most formative human relations: the primary relations between the female and male halves of humanity and between them and their daughters and sons. It is on this substrate of primary relations that all social organization rests. Not only are these relations key to survival and reproduction; these are also the relations through which people acquire their mental and emotional maps for what is normal, moral, possible. It is where they first learn, and continually practice, either respect for the human rights of others or acceptance of chronic human rights violations as "just the way things are."

Given these seemingly obvious dynamics, one must ask why intimate relations have not been considered important—much less central—in most studies of human society. The reason lies precisely in the kinds of mental and emotional maps most of us have inherited from earlier times that oriented much more closely to the domination model: maps in which anything pertaining to women or children is not considered of real importance.

How limiting this view has been is shown by a statistical study conducted under the auspices of the Center for Partnership Studies comparing measures of the status of women with quality of life indicators.[8] Based on statistics collected by international agencies from 89 nations, this study, *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, shows that in significant respects the status of women can be a better predictor of general quality of life than even gross domestic product (GDP). While economic development tends to go along with movement toward gender equality, societies with the same GDP can have great variations in gender relations—which in turn correlate strongly with a higher or lower general quality of life (Eisler, Loye, and Norgaard 1995).

This was a pioneering study released in 1995 in time for the United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing. Since then, the systemic importance of the status of women has been shown by other studies. For example, the annual Gender Gap Reports of the World Economic Forum show that nations with the lowest gender gaps are also regularly in the highest tiers of the annual World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Reports (Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi 2011).

These gender-holistic studies show that economics cannot be understood, or effectively changed, without attention to other core cultural components—and that a key component is the construction of the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity. More recently, my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* documents the connection between a society's economic policies and practices and what is considered normal in gender roles and relations (Eisler 2007).

Nonetheless, many people still dismiss the ranking of the male over the female half of humanity as "just a women's issue." They avoid dealing with such matters as women's and children's rights, at best inserting a few sentences about them in their books. Even works about systems theory fail to give importance to these relations, and in most cases do not include them.

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Indeed, until relatively recently, the construction of the primary human relations between women and men and between parents and children as rigid rankings of domination was not even part of the cultural discourse. It was simply assumed to be natural, even moral.

All this is our heritage from more authoritarian and male dominated times. So also is the fact that worldwide traditions of violence against the majority of humanity—women and children—receive only passing attention, and are in many world regions not even prosecuted as crimes (Eisler 2013). Cultural traditions that blight and take the lives of millions every year are still split off as "just women's issues and children's issues" from the "important" issues that are the proper subject of scientific study—so deeply engrained is the fragmentation of consciousness that makes it possible to marginalize issues affecting the majority of humanity.

This takes us to one of the ways domination-oriented cultures maintain and reconstruct themselves: the fragmentation of perception into rigid compartments that make it difficult to see connections between various aspects of reality. Modern physics demolished this mechanistic way of describing reality in its repeated observation of the fluidity between energy and matter and in the insight that the observer affects what is observed. But these insights, too, are kept in a hermetically sealed compartment, as if physics had nothing to do with anything else that happens on our planet.

This fragmentation of perception constricts and distorts consciousness. It has even suppressed consciousness of a seemingly obvious fact. This is that, if we are serious about cultural transformation in a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable direction, we have to take into account the cultural construction of the most foundational human relations: the relations between women and men and between parents and children that provide our first mental (and as neuroscience now shows, neural) templates for human relations (National Research Council 2000; Niehoff 1999; Perry n.d.).

## CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION THEORY

Looking at cultural evolution through the analytical lens of the partnership–domination continuum offers grounded hope for a more equitable and peaceful future. It makes it possible to see that all around us there is movement toward family and social structures that are closer to the partnership template—albeit against enormous resistance. This is why I want to close with a description of the strand of human possibilities theory I call cultural transformation theory and its implications for research and action.

Most theories of cultural evolution have described a linear progression from "primitive" to "civilized." Cultural transformation theory offers a conceptual framework that is not unilinear but rather multilinear. Specifically, it proposes that the partnership model and the domination model are two basic attractors for social systems; that movement from one to the other does *not* follow a linear progression; and that times of disequilibrium—such as ours—offer the opportunity for fundamental cultural transformation.

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Cultural transformation theory proposes that while social systems, like all living systems, seek to maintain themselves, transformative change is possible during periods of systems disequilibrium. It suggests that there are bifurcation points where a system can either move to a different level or return to the old level. Specifically, it shows that cultural evolution has been characterized by the tension between the partnership and domination models—and that we are at a time when this tension is coming to a head.

I want to again emphasize that cultural transformation theory has commonalities with both new theories, such as nonlinear dynamics and chaos theory, as well as earlier theories, because some of what is today presented as new is actually an expansion of earlier insights. For example, the theories of social psychologist Kurt Lewin about how systems unfreeze and refreeze prefigures insights of what can happen in states of social disequilibrium. Feminist theory also prefigures some of the tenets of cultural transformation theory. And many evolutionary studies, starting with Darwin, have shown the unique capacities of our species (for details on what Darwin had to say about our species, see Loye 2010).

However, cultural transformation theory adds important new dimensions to these insights. Many popular evolution theories minimize the importance of human agency; for example, most evolutionary psychologists and sociobiologists maintain that human behavior is controlled by ancestral evolutionary imperatives that developed millennia ago. They basically ignore the interaction between biology and culture, and minimize the fact that we human are capable of conscious choice. By contrast, both bio-culturalism and cultural transformation theory recognize the interactive relationship between biology and culture. Moreover, they propose that, while we are profoundly affected by our cultural environment, we also affect it in an interactive process guided by our conscious goals and plans. In other words, we *can* change our cultures.

Change is of course a constant in the living world. But there is a big difference between change within the parameters of a particular social system and transformative change. The first kind of change does not alter a social system's basic identity or configuration. The second kind of change shifts the system from one basic identity or configuration to another. It is this *transformative* change that is the focus of cultural transformation theory.

I have elsewhere presented data based on findings from archeology and mythology suggesting that the original direction of civilization was more toward the partnership model (see, e.g., Eisler 1987; 1995; 2000; see also Eisler 1993; 1997; 2003). In the earliest cradles of civilization, going back 10,000 years to the beginning of the Neolithic or first Agrarian Age, there are few indications of destruction through warfare or fortifications. We also do not find in their extensive art images that idealize warfare or rape, as we do in the art of later chronically warlike and violent times. While there were some differences in status and in wealth, as the British archeologist James Mellaart (1967) writes, these were not extreme. As the Lithuanian archeologist Marija Gimbutas (1982), the Greek archeologists Nicolas Platon (1966) and Nino Marinatos (1993), and the British archeologist Ian Hodder (2004) write, the evidence supports the conclusion that women were not subordinate to men.

However, these were *not* matriarchies, or societies governed only by women, as nineteenth-century scholars claimed. They were cultures where there was a more balanced relationship between women and men. As reflected in their art focusing on nature and the life-giving powers inherent in woman's body, the belief systems of these societies focused more on the power to give and nurture life than on the power to take and control life.

I have also elsewhere described the prehistoric shift to the domination model during a period of massive disequilibrium. While my focus was primarily on early Western civilization—Europe and the Middle East—the same pattern has been found by scholars in other areas. For instance, a multidisciplinary team of scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing tested the applicability of cultural transformation theory to China and found the same pattern of an early partnership direction followed by a shift to the domination model (Min 1995).

But even after this shift, the partnership model continued to act as an attractor. All through recorded history, there have been periodic partnership resurgences. In Western history, such periods include the early Christian movement and the eleventh- and twelfth-century resurgence of a more stereotypically feminine ethos expressed by the veneration of Mary and the Troubadour poetry.

Most importantly, modern history has been a time of cumulating challenges to entrenched traditions of domination. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought challenges to the so-called divinely ordained right of kings to rule over their "subjects" and monarchies were, at least in some world regions, replaced by republics. In the same centuries, men's so-called divinely right to rule over the women and children in the "castles" of their homes began to be challenged. The nineteenth century brought movements against economic oppression and domination, the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements challenging the "divinely ordained right" of one race to dominate and even enslave another, and an organized feminist movement challenging traditions of male-dominance. Then came the twentieth-century civil rights and anti-colonial movements, the indigenous liberation movements, and the women's liberation and women's rights movements. Even the environmental movement is a challenge to traditions of domination: to man's once celebrated "conquest of nature."

All these progressive movements are part of a larger movement toward another fundamental cultural transformation—this time from domination to partnership. But for this shift to be completed requires informed and conscious human agency.

## TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Until now, the primary focus of modern progressive movements has been the top of the domination pyramid: the so-called public sphere of economic and political relations from which women and children are excluded in the domination model. A great deal of attention has been given to what was once aptly called the "men's world." But the foundational relations—parent–child and woman–man relations in the so-called private sphere—have received far less attention from those working for a more equitable and peaceful world.

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By contrast, those pushing us back to more rigid rankings of domination recognize that gender relations and parent–child relations are fundamental to what is considered normal in *all* relations. This connection is why the most repressive modern regimes—from Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union to Khomeini's Iran to the Taliban of Afghanistan—have sprung up where family and gender relations based on domination and submission were firmly in place. The systemic importance of these relations is also why, once in power, these regimes have pushed policies that have as their goal the reinstatement of a punitive father in complete control of his family.

This is why so-called religious fundamentalists—be they Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Christian—focus so much on the return to a "traditional family" in which men dominate women and children learn never to question orders, no matter how painful or unjust. It is also why fundamentalist leaders fiercely oppose reproductive freedom for women. It also helps explain why they are virulently hostile to gays, as in their eyes gay men violate the God-given order of a man never taking the subservient role of a woman. It is why the so-called Christian Right has in the United States even opposed federal legislation to protect women from violence as well as government funding for shelters for abused women (as in former Senator Laxalt's so-called Family Protection Act). It is also why organizations such as the Promise Keepers offered men the false choice between neglecting or abandoning their families and "regaining control."

Studies of society must take these key dynamics into account. At the same time, we also have to change the political conversation.

Rhetoric about "strengthening the family" and "family values" needs to be challenged by asking what kind of family we want to strengthen and value. Is it a family based on rankings of domination in which a male head of household "calls the shots" and human rights violations are viewed as "just the way things are"? Or is it a partnership-oriented family in which both halves of humanity are given equal value and children learn early on to view relations based on respect for everyone's human rights as normal? Does strengthening the family mean supporting policies that promote families in which a "strong" father is in complete control? Or does it mean supporting nurturing parenting by both men and women? (For a progressive family agenda, see Eisler 2002, 2013).

We also have to show policy-makers and the public at large the connection between these very different family models and two very different types of social policies. If we continue to let the "strong" punitive father, rather than the nurturing parent, be the ideal norm, we cannot effectively counter the cultural drift back to "strong" leaders who, like the punitive male head of household, likewise rely on fear and violence to impose control.

Nor can we realistically expect fiscal policies that support caring and nurturance, such as universal healthcare, childcare, and help for the poor—policies that reflect the ideal of a nurturing and caring parent rather than a punitive father. Indeed, the problem is not, as we often hear, the historic move to capitalism (that is, to a market economy); it is that we have through so-called neo-liberalism and "trickle down economics" seen a return to an economics of domination, where those on bottom (as in the kingdoms and caliphates of old) are to content themselves with

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the scraps dropping from the opulent tables of those on top, and where freedom is used to justify exploitation by those in control, whether it is the exploitation of people or of nature.

This is one of the lessons from the last several decades in the United States, which have been marked by a massive regression to the domination model through the rightist–fundamentalist–corporatist alliance. And it is not coincidental that, starting with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, which first brought this alliance together, it has invested enormous money and energy in trying to push us back to one of the fundamentals of domination systems: a family where children learn early on to equate difference, beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species between male and female, with superiority or inferiority, dominating or being dominated, being served or serving.

This regression is most virulent in the resurgence of so-called religious fundamentalism in the Muslim world, where despotic control by the male head of household is the model for despotic control in the tribe or state, so much so that even when there are democratic elections a majority of people have voted for repressive fundamentalist regimes such as Hamas in Gaza and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

From this perspective, we can see that the struggle for our future is not between religious and secular values. The real issue is what kind of religious or secular values are being advanced: partnership values or dominator values.

At the core of many religious teachings are stereotypically "feminine" values such as caring, sharing, and nonviolence. For example, Jesus taught partnership values: stereotypically feminine values such as caring, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, and love. By contrast, the leaders of the Christian right focus on hate-mongering, scapegoating, sexual control over women, and violent discipline of children—all designed for dominator systems maintenance.

The political agenda of fundamentalists—whether Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Christian—is a domination agenda. It is re-imposing a system of rigid top-down control: strong-man rule in both the family and the state, the ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, and fear and institutionalized violence to maintain a system of top-down rankings—be they man over woman, man over man, race over race, or religion over religion.

Today's religious fundamentalism, however, is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a larger worldwide regression to the domination model. It has gone along with the again widening gap between haves and have-nots, a mass media that idealizes "heroic" male violence and marginalizes women and anything stereotypically considered feminine, elections where politicians are for sale to the highest bidder, and escalating violence and environmental destruction worldwide.

That is the domination side of the picture. Yet there is also the partnership side: the continuing worldwide movement toward real political democracy, environmental sustainability, and economic, social, racial, gender, and family equity.

Many so-called "private" issues are becoming political issues—issues that people did not even talk about not so long ago, such as the global pandemic of violence in the name of tradition against women and children. We are beginning to have a children's rights movement. The international women's movement is

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growing. And both national and international agencies are beginning to recognize some of the dynamics I have described—that raising the status of women is key to economic development and that violence against women and children is a training ground for using force to impose one's will on others—and hence a training for national and international violence.

In these and other ways, we are moving toward the truly systemic partnership movement that can bring about transformative change. But unless we build the solid foundations on which more partnership-oriented societies can be built worldwide—and shift from domination to partnership in our primary gender and parent–child relations—we will continue to see regressions to the domination side. And at our level of technological development, these regressions may threaten nothing less than our species' survival.

## CONCLUSION

Human possibilities theory is grounded in a holistic/systems perspective that has been gradually emerging. The new conceptual framework of the partnership/domination continuum offers a dynamic/nonlinear rather than mechanistic/linear model for living systems, focused on self-organization rather than predetermined directions.

Human possibilities theory—which includes the methodological approach of studying relational dynamics, cultural transformation theory, and bio-culturalism, helps advance this holistic/systems perspective in a number of ways. The theory:

1. Examines the interactive field of human biological and cultural evolution through the new analytical lens of the partnership/domination continuum;
2. Proposes a multilinear rather than unilinear model for human cultural evolution;
3. Proposes that human behaviors—and even brain neurochemistry—are to a large extent products of adaptations to cultural environments orienting to the domination model or the partnership model, rather than being the automatic result of ancient evolutionary imperatives;
4. Highlights the importance of the cultural construction of the relations between the male and female halves of humanity and between them and their children, recognizing that it is through these primary relations that people acquire their basic mental, emotional, and neural maps for *all* relations;
5. Shows that we humans do more than just adapt to our cultural environments in a mechanistic manner, but are also creators of our cultural environments;
6. Shows that cultural transformation is possible in periods of systems disequilibrium;
7. Shows the possibility of transformative change through a systemic approach that takes into account the totality of a social system, including the primary human relations as the substrate on which all social organization rests.

These principles are of immediate utility. The disequilibrium of the rapid technological changes of modern times—now accelerating as we move from the industrial

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to the postindustrial knowledge/service technological age—has caused great social and economic dislocation. But it has also made possible great changes in both consciousness and social organization through progressive social actions.

However, this movement has not been linear. It can best be imaged as an upward spiral toward the partnership model countered by enormous resistance and periodic regressions to the domination model.

Our future will not be decided by impersonal evolutionary or systems dynamics. It will be decided by conscious, self-directed human agency. We are not prisoners of "selfish genes." We have it in our power to consciously and creatively move to a more equitable and fulfilling partnership way of life.

The problem is not, as we are often told, "human nature." The human yearning for caring connection, for love, for creating rather than destroying, for living in peace rather than war, for mutually respectful and beneficial rather than tense and violent relations in all spheres of life, is integral to human nature. This yearning lies behind all the progressive modern social movements that have over the last centuries challenged traditions of domination.

Now is the time to broaden and deepen this movement by changing traditions of domination and violence in the most formative human relations: the gender and parent–child relations where traditions of domination have been the most resistant to change. Systems science can make a big contribution to this urgently needed change through an integrated approach that fully takes these relations into account.

We owe it to our children and to future generations to show that a partnership future is not a *utopia* or no place, but a *pragmatopia* or possible place. We can make this possibility a reality by using our creativity to build partnership cultures worldwide.

## NOTES

1. Eisler, R. *Human possibilities* (work in progress).
2. These interactions have been described by Maturana and Varela as autopoiesis, by Prigogine and Stengers as auto- and cross-catalysis, and by Csanyi and Kampis's concept of autogenesis.
3. There are in cultural systems feedback and feedforward loops, continual auto-catalytic and cross-catalytic processes that maintain the system's basic character. I use the term "feedforward" in the sense of "top-down feedforward" proposed by Karl Pribram, rather than in the sense of the older "bottom-up feedforward," such as the passage of a visual image from the retina to the cortex.
4. The categories democratic/authoritarian come closest to partnership and domination, but they are generally used only to describe political arrangements (the presence or absence of "free elections"), and are only occasionally used to also denote family structures. Moreover, they do not describe other key components of social systems, such as economics, religion, and education.
5. In their analysis of capitalism and socialism, Marx, and particularly Engels, noted what they called the first class oppression: that of women by men. But, except in some passages in Engel's *Origin of the Family* and an occasional paragraph in Marx's writings, they viewed this issue as a peripheral "woman question" rather than a key social issue.
6. Private communication from Peggy Reeves Sanday, January 30, 2002.
7. Eisler, R. *Human possibilities*.
8. Eisler, Loye, and Norgaard (1995). The nine measures used to assess the degree of gender equity were: the number of literate females for every 100 literate males; female life expectancy as a percentage of male life expectancy; the number of women for every 100 men in parliaments and other governing bodies; the number of females in secondary education for every 100 males;

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maternal mortality; contraceptive prevalence; access to abortion; and based on measures used by the Population Crisis Committee (now Population Action International), social equality for women and economic equality for women. The thirteen measures used to assess quality of life, were: overall life expectancy; human rights ratings; access to healthcare; access to clean water; literacy; infant mortality; number of refugees fleeing the country; the percentage of daily caloric requirements consumed; Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measure of wealth; the percentage of GDP distributed to the poorest 40 percent of households; the ratio of GDP going to the wealthiest versus the poorest 20 percent of the population; and as measures of environmental sensitivity, the percentage of forest habitat remaining, and compliance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. In exploring the relation between the gender equity and quality of life variables with descriptive, correlational, factor, and multiple regression analyses, the authors found a strong systemic correlation between these two measures. These findings were consistent with their hypothesis that increased equity for women is central to a higher quality of life for a country as a whole, and that gender inequity contracts the opportunities and capabilities, not only of women, but of the entire population. The link between gender equity and quality of life was confirmed at a very high level of statistical significance for correlational analysis. 61 correlations at the .001 level with 18 additional correlations at the .05 level were found, for a total of 79 significant correlations in the predicted direction. This link was further confirmed by factor analysis. High factor loadings for gender equity and quality of life variables accounted for 87.8 percent of the variance. Regression analysis, also yielded significant results. An R-square of .84, with statistical significance at the .0001 level, provided support for the hypothesis that gender equity is a strong indicator of the quality of life.

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