

# KOSMOS

Co-Creating the New Civilization



**THE NATURAL WORLD | EMERGING WORLDVIEWS AND CULTURE**

## Cultural Transformation: Building a Partnership World

by Riane Eisler

Can we build a world where our great potentials for consciousness, caring and creativity are realized? What would this more equitable, less violent world look like? How can we build it?

These questions animated my research over the past four decades. They arose very early in my life, when my parents and I narrowly escaped from Nazi Europe. Had we not been able to flee my native Vienna and later find refuge in Cuba, we would almost certainly have been killed in the Holocaust, as happened to most of my extended family.

As I grew up in the industrial slums of Havana, I didn't realize that studying social systems would become my life's work. By the time I did, it was clear that our present course is not sustainable. In our time of nuclear and biological weapons, violence to settle international disputes can be disastrous for us all—as can our once hallowed 'conquest of nature' when advanced technologies are already causing environmental damage of unprecedented magnitude.

I saw that a grim future awaits my children—and all of us—unless there is transformative cultural change. But the critical issue addressed by my multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural, historical study of human societies is this question: *Transformation from what to what?*

Not so long ago, many people thought that shifting from capitalism to communism would bring a more just, less violent society. But the communist revolutions in Russia and China brought further violence and injustice.

Today, many people believe that capitalism and democratic elections are the solution. But capitalism has not brought peace or equity: Hitler was democratically elected, and elections following the Arab Spring led to repressive Islamist regimes.

Others argue that returning to pre-scientific Western times or replacing Western secularism, science and technology with Eastern religions will cure our world's ills. They ignore that the religious Middle Ages were brutally violent and repressive, that Eastern religions have helped perpetuate inequality and oppression, and that today's fundamentalist religious cultures, both Eastern and Western, are behind some of our planet's most serious problems.

All these approaches are based on old thinking—and, as Einstein observed, the same thinking that created our problems cannot solve them. As long as we look at societies from the perspective of conventional categories such as capitalist vs. socialist, Eastern vs. Western, religious vs. secular, or technologically

developed vs. undeveloped, we cannot effect real cultural transformation. Indeed, history amply shows that societies in every one of these categories can be, and have been, repressive, unjust and violent.

This is why my re-examination of social systems transcends old social categories. It uses a new method of analysis (the study of relational dynamics) that draws from a larger database than conventional studies. It looks at a much larger, holistic picture that includes the *whole* of humanity, both its female and male halves; the *whole* of our lives, not only the 'public' sphere of politics and economics but where we all live, in our families and other intimate relations; and the *whole* of our history, including the thousands of years we call prehistory.

Looking at this more complete picture makes it possible to see interactive relationships or configurations that are not visible through the lenses of old social categories. There were no names for these social configurations, so I called one the *domination system* and the other the *partnership system*.

### A New Perspective on History

Looking at history from the perspective of the partnership system and the domination system as two underlying social possibilities, we see patterns behind seemingly random events.

We see that much that is today considered new and radical actually has very ancient roots. For most of our prehistory, societies oriented more to the partnership system. As I detail in *The Chalice and the Blade, Sacred Pleasure*, and other works, there are no signs of warfare in the archeological record until just a few thousand years ago; houses and burials do not reflect large gaps between haves and have-nots; and these earlier societies were neither patriarchies nor matriarchies but cultures where women and men were equally valued.

But archeology and myths also reveal signs of a major cultural shift toward the domination system. That is the bad news. The good news is that over the last centuries there has been a strong movement to reverse this shift in cultural direction.

One modern progressive movement after another has challenged traditions of domination—from the 'divinely-ordained' right of despotic kings to rule their 'subjects,' the 'divinely-ordained' right of men to rule the women and children in the 'castles' of their homes, and the 'divinely-ordained' right of one race or nation to



Woman voting in presidential run-offs in Mali, 2013. Four initiatives were implemented by civil society women's organizations and the Ministry of Gender with a view to stronger women's participation in the electoral process.

rule over another, all the way to man's 'divinely-ordained' right to dominate and conquer nature.

All these movements have been fiercely resisted. And though there has been forward movement, even after gains were made, there have been massive regressions to more rigid domination systems—from the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes of the 20th century to today's 'religious fundamentalists,' who are actually domination fundamentalists seeking to push us back to a time when most men and all women did not question their subordinate place under those in control.

### Advancing the Movement to Partnership

To answer the question of why the movement toward a more equitable and peaceful society keeps faltering, we have to look at the connection between whether a society is peaceful and equitable or warlike and inequitable, and how it structures the most fundamental human relations: the relations between the female and male halves of humanity and between them and their daughters and sons.

Because this connection has been ignored, we have lacked the solid foundations for a more peaceful and caring social organization. The main focus of progressive movements has been on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: political and

economic domination. But the base on which the pyramid keeps rebuilding itself—the primary human relations where children first learn what is considered normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, moral or immoral—has remained largely in place.

This explains why those who want to push us back to a more autocratic, violent and unjust way of living uniformly work to maintain or impose rigid rankings of domination in gender and parent-child relations. For the Nazis, a top priority was getting women back into their 'traditional' place in a 'traditional' family—code words for a top-down, male-dominated, authoritarian family. This was also a priority for Stalin in the former Soviet Union and Khomeini in Iran. It still is for so-called religious fundamentalists today—both Eastern and Western—who, not coincidentally, also back 'holy wars' and top-down rule.

Yet, ironically, for many people who consider themselves progressives, women's rights and children's rights are still 'just' women's and children's issues.

### Two New Social Categories

To move forward, we need new social categories that show the connection between what is considered normal in gender and childhood relations and whether societies are more peaceful and equitable or violent and inequitable.

Cross-culturally and through history, societies adhering closely to the *domination system* have the following core configuration:

- Authoritarian rule in both the family and state or tribe and hierarchies of domination;
- The ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half, and greater valuing of *stereotypically* ‘hard’ or ‘masculine’ traits and activities like domination and violence;
- A high degree of institutionalized or built-in violence—from wife- and child-beating to war and terrorism, since fear and force ultimately maintain domination;
- Stories that present hierarchies of domination as divinely or naturally ordained—beginning with the rigid ranking of male over female.

Moving toward the *partnership* side of the continuum—and it is always a matter of degree—we see a different configuration:

- A more democratic organization in both the family and state or tribe;
- Both halves of humanity are equally valued, and *stereotypically* feminine values such as caring and nonviolence (which are considered ‘unmanly’ in the domination system) are highly regarded, whether in women or men;
- A less violent way of living, since violence is not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination, be it in families or the family of nations;
- Beliefs that present relations of mutual respect, accountability, and benefit as natural, and support hierarchies of actualization, where power is used to empower rather than disempower others.

*The partnership configuration is a blueprint for a more equitable, caring and sustainable future. It makes it possible to identify four cornerstones that provide solid foundations for this future.*

### The First Cornerstone: Childhood Relations

Neuroscience shows that the neural pathways of our brains are not set at birth: they are largely formed in interaction with a child’s early experiences. This is why, although people can, and do, change throughout life, early experiences and relations are critical. If family relations based on chronic violations of human rights are considered normal and moral, they provide mental and emotional models for condoning such violations in other relations. If these relations are violent, children also learn that violence from those who are more powerful toward those who are less powerful is an acceptable way of dealing with conflicts and/or problems.

Fortunately, some people reject these teachings. But, unfortunately, many replicate them, not only in their intimate relations but in *all* relations—including international ones. Coercive, inequitable and violent childrearing is therefore foundational to the imposition and maintenance of a coercive, inequitable and chronically violent social organization.

Since it is through childhood experiences and relations that people acquire habits of feeling, thinking and behavior, we need a global campaign against abuse and violence in childhood relations:

- Education: providing both women and men the knowledge and skills for empathic, sensitive, nonviolent, authoritative rather than authoritarian childrearing. A resource is the *Caring and Connected Parenting Guide* that can be downloaded for free at [www.saiv.org](http://www.saiv.org).
- Laws: enacting and enforcing laws criminalizing child abuse and legislation funding education for nonviolent, empathic and fair childrearing. *Protecting the Majority of Humanity* shows how international law can protect children and women from family violence.
- Media: eliminating the presentation of violence as a means of resolving conflicts and ‘comedies’ where family members abuse and humiliate each other.
- Morality: engaging spiritual and religious leaders to take a strong stand against intimate violence—the violence that every year blights, and often takes, the lives of millions of children and women, and leads to violence in all relations. This is the mission of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV).

### The Second Cornerstone: Gender Relations

How a society constructs the roles and relations of the two halves of humanity—women and men—is not ‘just a women’s issue.’ It not only affects both women’s and men’s individual life options; it also shapes families, education, religion, politics and economics.

When people learn 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, they internalize a template for relations that can automatically be applied to a different race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and so forth.

The social construction of gender roles and relations also shapes a society’s guiding values. Along with the subordination of the female half of humanity we inherited from more rigid domination times comes the subordination of traits and activities stereotypically associated with femininity, such as caring, caregiving and nonviolence that in domination systems are considered unfit for ‘real men.’



Afghan women attend one of the almost 3,000 literacy courses supported by the United Nations Children's Fund for nearly 78,000 women last year.

This gendered system of values adversely affects general quality of life. For example, *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*—a study based on statistics from 89 nations conducted by the Center for Partnership Studies—found that in significant ways the status of women can be a better predictor of general quality of life than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the conventional measure of a nation's economic health. Since then, other studies, such as the World Economic Forums' Gender Gap Reports, have confirmed this correlation between the status of women and a nation's economic success and quality of life.

A sign of hope is the blurring of rigid gender stereotypes. Men are nurturing babies and women are entering positions of economic and political leadership. But this movement remains slow and localized, and in some cultures and subcultures is fiercely opposed.

What is needed is a global campaign for equitable and nonviolent gender relations backed by progressive leaders.

As long as women still hold a small minority of political positions, we cannot really talk of representative democracy. As long as boys and men learn to equate 'real masculinity' with violence and control—be it through 'heroic' epics, war toys, or violent TV, films and video games—we cannot realistically expect an end to the arms build-ups that are today bankrupting our world and the

terrorism and aggressive warfare that in our age of nuclear and chemical warfare threaten our survival. Nor can we realistically expect an end to racism, anti-Semitism, and other ugly -isms as long as people learn early on to equate difference—beginning with the fundamental difference between female and male—with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated.

### The Third Cornerstone: Economic Relations

Current economic systems—whether capitalist, socialist or communist—endanger our natural life-support. The gap between haves and have-nots has been growing both between and within nations. Poverty seems intractable, speculation is rampant, as are insensitive and ultimately destructive financial practices.

As documented in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, we need a new economics. The real wealth of our world is not financial; it consists of the contributions of people and of nature. What's needed are economic measurements, policies and practices that give visibility and value to the most important human work: the work of caring for people, beginning in childhood, and caring for nature.

This is essential not only for human and environmental reasons but for purely economic ones. To create the 'high quality human

capital' economists say is needed for the postindustrial information/knowledge era, we must recognize what both psychology and neuroscience tell us: this capital largely depends on the kind of care and early education children receive.

Strong policy support for the caregiving work performed in both the market and the household economic sectors is essential to produce this 'high quality human capital.' This support is also urgently needed to cut through cycles of poverty since worldwide women still do the bulk of this work for very low wages in the market and for free in homes—largely accounting for the disproportionate poverty of women globally.

Important positive trends are that many West European nations offer monetary assistance and education for parenting, along with paid parental leave, health care, and high quality early childhood education.

Satellite economic indicators are also counting the economic value of the work of caregiving in homes. The Swiss government found that if the unpaid work in households were included, it would constitute 40% of the reported Swiss GDP. A recent Australian study found an even higher value of 50%!

It makes no sense to talk of hunger and poverty in generalities when the mass of the world's poor and the poorest of the poor are women and children. Even in the rich United States, women over the age of 65 are, according to US Census statistics, twice as likely to be poor as men over 65. A major reason is that most of these women are, or were, caregivers.

The Center for Partnership Studies' Caring Economy Campaign (CEC) demonstrates the importance of investing in caring for people, starting in early childhood, through caregiver tax credits, Social Security for caregivers, and subsidies for childcare. CEC offers resources, training and advocacy opportunities, including an online leadership training program.

The CEC is developing new Social Wealth Economic indicators that show the enormous economic value of the work of care and early education, as well as focusing attention on marginalized populations, such as people of color in the United States.

People need meaningful work. A negative income tax or guaranteed income for doing nothing is no solution to chronic poverty. The most important and meaningful work is that of caring for other humans, particularly our children and our growing elderly population, as well as for our natural environment. Giving value to caring and caregiving imbues work with meaning. It also gives work a spiritual dimension. Compassion and love are at the core of all spiritual traditions.

### The Fourth Cornerstone: Stories, Morality and Spirituality

Cultural transformation requires accurate stories about 'human nature.'

The message of many stories we inherited from earlier times is that dominating or being dominated are our only alternatives. Religious stories about 'original sin' and secular stories about 'evolutionary imperatives' claim that humans are innately sinful and violent—and must be rigidly controlled. But findings from neuroscience demonstrate that although we humans have the capacity for cruelty and violence, we are actually 'wired' more for empathic and caring relationships. For example, studies show that the pleasure centers in our brains light up more when we give than when we win.

Spreading this knowledge about human nature requires a concerted effort through the arts, music, literature and science. We also have to spread the new language of the partnership system and domination system. We must show that the struggle for our future is not between religion and secularism, right and left, East and West, or capitalism and socialism, but within all these societies between traditions of domination and a partnership way of life.

These changes in language and stories have enormous implications for both spirituality and morality. Rather than being used to coerce and dominate, morality is imbued with caring and love. And spirituality is no longer an escape to otherworldly realms from the suffering inherent in a domination world but an active engagement in creating a better world right here on Earth.

### Conclusion

It takes courage to challenge injustice and cruelty not only in politics and business but also in parent-child, gender and sexual relations. This may not be popular, and may even be dangerous, since domination and violence in intimate and intergroup relations are encoded in some religious and ethnic traditions we inherited from more rigid domination times. But it must be done.

Every one of us can play a role in the cultural transformation from domination to partnership. Working together, we can build the foundations for a more peaceful, equitable, sustainable world where all children can realize their capacities for consciousness, caring and creativity—the capacities that make us fully human.

Note. Portions of this article draw from *The Chalice and the Blade, Sacred Pleasure, Tomorrow's Children, The Power of Partnership, The Real Wealth of Nations* and other publications by Riane Eisler.

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Riane Eisler is best known for her international bestsellers *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* and *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. Eisler is President of the Center for Partnership Studies and her research and writings are widely used as the basis for social action campaigns such as CPS's Caring Economy Campaign and the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence. For more information see: [www.partnershipway.org](http://www.partnershipway.org); [www.rianeeisler.com](http://www.rianeeisler.com); [www.caringeconomy.org](http://www.caringeconomy.org); [www.saiv.net](http://www.saiv.net).