

## The School for Violence -- A conversation with Riane Eisler

By Helen Knode

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**Riane Eisler** is a macro-historian; systems and cultural-transformation theorist; international activist for peace, human rights and the environment; and president of the [Center for Partnership Studies](#). In *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), an international best-seller, she reviewed Western history in a radical new way, and introduced the models of domination and partnership as two underlying possibilities for human organization. In *Sacred Pleasure* (1995), she applied these models to the erotic; in *Tomorrow's Children* (2000), she applied them to child development and education. Her next book, *The Power of Partnership*, due in spring 2002, is a wildly original self-help book. We can't help ourselves, she says, outside the complex web of our relationships — from family, to nation, to the Earth. She devotes a chapter to international relations, and the subject of terrorism comes up again and again. Eisler discusses terrorism and transformation with novelist and former L.A. Weekly staff writer Helen Knode.

RIANE EISLER: Look, this is not about the U.S. and the Arabs. It goes much deeper — and we need to understand this to deal with the long-range implications of post-industrial terrorism. We need to distinguish between what lies behind anti-American sentiment and what lies behind these acts of terrorism. I ask myself two questions. What's at the bottom of these virulent acts against the U.S.? And what kind of family produces a person willing to fly an airplane into a building full of people he's never met, who aren't armed, who've never done anything to hurt him directly?

HELEN KNODE: *Family? Discussions of the Middle East don't usually start there.*

But it's where I start, because gender relations and parent-child relations are the critical, formative relations. This is where we first learn what's normal and moral, where we learn values and behaviors.

*Including terror and its uses, you mean.*

Precisely. Terror and hate have a context. My research shows that underneath conventional classifications — religious versus secular, tribal versus industrial, right versus left, capitalist versus communist — are two underlying ways of structuring relations. They're actually two opposite poles, with a continuum in between. At one end of this continuum is the dominator society. Dominator societies have existed throughout history and have the same basic plan, whether it's Attila's Huns, Hitler's Germany or the Taliban's Afghanistan. These societies consist of rigid top-down rankings, of "superiors" over "inferiors," men over women, adults over children, "in-groups" over "out-groups" — rankings backed up by force and the threat of force in homes, in society, and between societies in chronic wars.

Terror is built into the dominator system, and these bombings are the latest manifestation of that fact. Muslim fundamentalists are extremely dominator, in a bizarrely feudal way. It's as if they have one foot in the Middle Ages and another in our postmodern world with its powerful technologies of communication and destruction.

*You're saying that their family structure is feudal, too.*

Yes, but first I want to be clear that this isn't an anti-Muslim diatribe. There are dominator elements in every country, and we've seen a worldwide dominator regression in recent years. We see it in

multinational sweatshops, environmental rollbacks, the widening gap between haves and have-nots, the IMF's structural-adjustment policies. And we see it in resurgent religious fundamentalism, in the East and West, aimed at putting women back in "their place" and reinstating the absolute authority of the father.

*Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson call submissive women the cure — free women anger God, and we're being punished.*

Yes, their initial response to this horrible tragedy was to use it to incite more hate and persecution of the groups they're after — feminists, secularists, abortionists, gays, lesbians, even People for the American Way. It's grotesque. I know Falwell apologized under pressure. But unfortunately it's not surprising that our own fundamentalists have introduced the first divisive note into a cataclysm that, above all, requires unity and sanity.

*Do they think bin Laden cares if any Christian God is worshipped?*

You see how the dominator mindset works. What they call the cure, I call a central problem — I, and every person who truly values freedom and democracy.

*We were talking about the feudal family and terrorism.*

Yes. Because in rigid dominator families, whether in the Muslim world or elsewhere, you learn from childhood that it's okay to impose your will by force on those weaker than you — women and children — that it's your God-given right to do so. And you learn never to express your anger or resentment against those who cause you pain, for fear of more pain. So you have a lot of stored rage that can be redirected toward "out-groups," in pogroms and lynchings and "holy wars."

*But you can't think that family is the only factor here. You're no Freudian.*

No, of course not. The family and society are profoundly interconnected. A mark of where a nation is on the dominator/partnership scale is how it treats women and children. Even if your family is less authoritarian, in a Muslim fundamentalist context, you still live in a culture where, for example, women get acid thrown in their face because they aren't wearing a burka, or get killed by members of their own family because they exhibit sexual independence. You live in a culture that worships strong-arm rule and male violence.

*"I and the public know, what all schoolchildren learn. Those to whom evil is done, do evil in return."*

Auden is right. My research shows a definite link between intimate violence and international violence. People in dominator societies learn to accept control from the top, gross inequities in living standards, a high degree of violence and fear in day-to-day life. The basic model for domination is the punitive parent, specifically the punitive male head of household. And since you can't go against this powerful figure, you learn to project onto "evil enemies."

*Although the U.S. isn't an entirely innocent victim. There are reasons why we're perceived as an enemy.*

Certainly. Our policies — for example, insistence on cutbacks in social services and privatization by debtor nations, alliances with oppressive dictatorships — have caused enormous suffering. But the goal of this terrorism is not justice or equity for the women, children and men who live in Arab countries. Osama bin Laden has enormous wealth, but does he do anything to help the hungry Afghan people? Do you realize how wealthy the Saudi elites are, in contrast to the mass of Arab people? No, this terrorism is about control and power through fear and force. They want to be the world's governing economic, religious and political power, and the West has that power.

*I've never heard this argument before. There are real grievances about oil, territory and multinational corporations, but you ä think the hate and violence mask another agenda.*

I do. Where dictators or repressive mullahs rule, they cultivate hatred of the U.S., and the West in general, for two reasons. One is fear of our cultural influence — freedom for women, the undermining of traditional authority, and Western democracy, as imperfect as it is. They see the threat this poses to their domination, and to a system based on rigid rankings. The other reason is that fanning hatred against the West deflects anger and rebellion from themselves. That keeps the people from turning against the elites, who benefit enormously from their ties to the West, while few if any of these benefits go to the average Arab.

*So what's your solution to terrorism? How do we fight it?*

There's a short-term strategy and a long-term strategy — and they have to be simultaneous. In the short term, I'm afraid that military response against terrorist bases in nations that fund and support terrorism is necessary.

*You've shocked me. The New Age community, the Dalai Lama, are calling for peace and love. I associate you with them philosophically.*

The pure “peace and love” response is the flip side of the “kill and hate” response. Neither is realistic, and both ignore the psychosocial dynamics of terrorism we've been talking about. Unfortunately, failure to respond will encourage more terrorism. In the dominator mind, there are only those who dominate and those who are dominated. Nonviolence is equated with women, with what's despised, what's controlled and is legitimately, and easily, terrorized into submission.

*But violence only breeds violence, you said it yourself.*

If you've got a psychopath lunging at you with a knife, that's not the time to talk about peace and love. It's the time to defend yourself to save your life. The time to talk about peace and love, and to put them into action, is before that person becomes a psychopath. If we're to effectively address the festering problems that breed terrorism, we have to deal with the foundations of violence. We have to think of the long term. Any war on terrorism is doomed to fail, just like the war on drugs, unless we address the deepest historical, cultural, social, economic, political and psychic forces that produce terrorism. This is urgent in our high-technology age.

*You know people argue that humans are naturally violent.*

This argument comes straight out of the dominator view of human nature. Evolutionary science shows we carry genes for both violence and caring. The decisive issue is our experiences, and particularly the influences of childhood. These experiences actually affect brain chemistry and synaptic development, and with that the propensity toward violence or caring. We'll never eliminate violence completely, but we can eliminate structural violence, violence built into the system.

*So addressing the foundations of violence would entail what?*

Cultural transformation. I spoke of two underlying ways of structuring relations — one is the dominator model, the other is what I call the partnership or respect model. Here power is nurturing and empowering, rather than fear-and-force-based and disempowering. The male and female halves of humanity are valued equally, and there's a high value placed on caregiving, empathy and nonviolence, qualities that are part of the biological repertoire of both men and women.

The U.S. is divided between partnership and domination. It does awful things and wonderful things. Think of the NGOs spending billions to help people worldwide —

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peace, human rights, feeding hunger. It behooves us to throw our resources into a shift toward partnership, at home and abroad. Did you know there's a new House bill to create a Department of Peace? We make a mistake to deal with dictatorships to protect our oil interests. We're safer in the long run to join with pro-democratic forces in the region. There are many people in the Muslim world who would welcome U.S. help. I know some of them. They're working for religious freedom, the human rights of women and children, family planning — real democracy, not just a vote.

We have to stop exporting our violent media. We have to re-examine the values behind globalization. If it's only to promote what we inaccurately call free enterprise, which primarily benefits the elites of the developing and developed world, then we're actually strengthening the top-down socioeconomic structures integral to the dominator model from which violence inevitably comes. On the other hand, if we back an international campaign involving heads of state and clergy to end intimate violence, we're dealing with foundational matters, with the school for violence. If we channel economic aid and training to the grassroots, if we channel health-care, nutrition and educational programs directly to women and children and make their implementation a keystone of globalization, we're addressing foundational matters.

*You're thinking multilevel solutions for a multilevel phenomenon.*

Let us call it the partnership response to terrorism. We need a long-range plan, and we need to do this together with people all over the world. And if we only talk violent solutions, we fuel the dominator regression that will be fatal to everything we Americans yearn for and aspire to. We have to change the foundational dynamics of terrorism. Without this, we'll never have lasting peace or security.

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