

**Stefano Mercanti****In Conversation with Riane Eisler**

Cultural historian and evolutionary theorist Riane Eisler talks to *Le Simplegadi* about her vision of new human possibilities and her belief in humanity's capacity for caring and mutuality as an alternative to the violence and domination of much of recorded history. In her ground-breaking works, *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) and *Sacred Pleasure* (1995), both published in more than 20 languages including the recent Italian re-editions by Udine University Press Forum, she gives evidence of "another history", that of the Neolithic before the violent invasions of pastoralist nomads, in which an equalitarian mode of living was far more central than the patriarchal dominator configuration. This resulted, as Eisler describes, in relations of "linking" rather than rigid "ranking", and what she calls "hierarchies of actualisation" rather than hierarchies of domination. This work provides a new radical perspective on the ways human relationships and institutions were structured and how they can be again structured, ranging from culture, education, and economics to spirituality, sexuality, and family and other intimate relationships.

**Stefano Mercanti** According to your Cultural Transformation Theory, the evolutionary movement of humanity does not follow a linear path. Originally, in the earliest cradles of civilization, as shown by the archaeological and mythical evidence in *The Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure*, it was more in a partnership direction; not ideal but more peaceful and equitable. Then there was a shift to domination. And now we have reached a crucial system bifurcation where there is an opportunity for transformative social and ideological change, but also the possibility for the dominator system to reconstitute itself in new

institutional and ideological forms. Do you believe that we are progressing enough toward a partnership model?

**Riane Eisler** We are actually in a period of regression. Yet we *can* move forward. To do so, however, we need an integrated approach.

Modern history has been a spiral upward movement from domination to partnership. That is the good news. The bad news is that this movement has been fiercely resisted and punctuated by periodic dips to the domination side.

Think back only a few hundred years, to the European Middle Ages. While there were some partnership elements, basically it looked like the Taliban with its rigid theocratic controls, its Inquisition with death by torture for so-called “heretics” and “witches”, its Crusades or Holy Wars, and its strict subordination of women and children – so much so that theologians even debated whether women, like men, have immortal souls.

Then, over the last centuries more and more people challenged traditions of domination. Through one progressive social movement after another, they challenged the so-called “divinely ordained” rights of kings to rule over their “subjects”, of men to rule over the women and children in the “castles” of their homes, of one race to rule over a supposedly “inferior” race, all the way to today’s challenge to the once hallowed “conquest of nature” – which at our level of technological development threatens our very survival.

There were many gains. But most of these movements focused on dismantling the top of the dominator pyramid – political, economic, and religious domination in the state or tribe – without adequate attention to the pyramid’s foundations: the formative family and gender relations. These are the relations where people learn early on either to respect human rights or to accept human rights violations are normal, and even moral.

So unless we pay attention to these relations, dominator systems will keep rebuilding themselves on these foundations in different forms. These can range from the totalitarian Nazi and Soviet regimes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the

religious fundamentalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> – which is actually dominator fundamentalism, because it seeks to push us back to the three core elements of domination systems: an authoritarian family and society, the use of fear and force to maintain control, and the rigid subordination of women and children.

Yet these connections are not visible if we look at societies through the lenses of old social categories such as religious vs. secular, right vs. left, capitalist vs. socialist, Eastern vs. Western, and so forth.

**SM** You write of patterns that are visible once we use the lenses of the partnership system and the domination system. Can you explain more about that?

**RE** Consider that a top priority for the repressive and violent Nazis was getting women back into their “traditional” place in a “traditional” family – code words for a top-down, male-dominated, authoritarian family where children learn that it is very painful to question orders, no matter how unjust. When Stalin came to power he too pushed for a return to a male-dominated family. And of course this was the top priority for Khomeini in Iran, as it still is for fundamentalists of all stripes – be they Eastern or Western – who, not coincidentally, also believe in ‘holy wars’ and authoritarian rule in the state or tribe.

These are all connected, mutually supporting components of dominator systems. Yet, ironically, many people who consider themselves progressives still view violations of women’s and children’s human rights as “just” women’s and children’s issues – to be addressed only after ‘more important problems’ have been resolved.

You would not try to build a house without a plan or blueprint of the whole house – including its foundations. In the same way, we need the social blueprint of the partnership configuration to build a more equitable, caring, and sustainable future. And here too, we have to pay particular attention to building its foundations in the formative relations that are the models (of either partnership or

domination) that children first learn, and that neuroscience tells us affect nothing less than the development of our brains.

**SM** The tension between dominator and partnership models has deeply conditioned both our public and private spheres. Differences between women and men are still very much emphasised in oppositional ways and seen constantly at war. How can women and men awaken from this dominator trance and develop a 'fully human' consciousness where both masculinity and femininity are expressed as integral?

**RE** An important aspect of the movement toward partnership is leaving behind the old dominator socialisation that put women and men in straitjackets, constricting each of our human potentials. For instance, leadership is supposed to be a male trait. Well, women can be leaders. But if a woman gives directions, if she is assertive, she is under the old system unfeminine, a "ball-breaker". The other side of the coin is that if men are caring, if men are sensitive, they are devalued as "effeminate", as "sissies", not only by other men but often by women.

This kind of thinking is indeed part of the "dominator trance" – and so is the notion that when we talk of gender it is a matter of women against men or men against women. Actually, we are talking about something fundamental to social health that affects girls and boys, men and women, in all aspects of our lives. But we cannot see this through the lenses of conventional categories such as right or left, religious or secular, eastern or western, and so on.

By contrast, the contrasting social configurations of the dominator system and the partnership system show the key importance of how the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity are constructed. We can then connect the dots – and make lasting progress.

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 – can we realistically expect to end 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 or terrorism threaten our survival? As long as women are only a small minority in policy and decision-making, can we seriously talk about “representative democracy”?

Can we realistically expect to end racism, anti-Semitism, and other ugly isms as long as children learn to equate difference – beginning with the fundamental difference between female and male – with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated, with being served or serving? And when we learn this early on, before our brains and our critical faculties are fully formed, that way of seeing difference can then automatically be applied to a different race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on.

**SM** Your book *Sacred Pleasure* looks at spirituality and sexuality, as well as romantic love, parenting, and just about everything else, from this new perspective. Can you elaborate?

**RE** My multidisciplinary, cross-cultural, historical research shows that how a society constructs the roles and relations of the two basic halves of humanity – women and men – not only affects women’s and men’s individual life options; it affects families, education, religion, politics, economics, and yes, sexuality and spirituality.

That is one of the key themes of *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body*. Masters and Johnson and other sexologists write of the “pleasure bond” as conducive to mutuality in sexual relations. But this would disrupt rankings of domination, so male control of the female body is integral to the construction of sexuality in societies that orient closely to the dominator system.

One very powerful mechanism to achieve this is the erotisation of domination. For example, the medieval Church made it a sin to have sexual intercourse in any way other than the man-on-top/woman-on-bottom position, a teaching still exported centuries later by Christian missionaries – hence the term “missionary position”.

A related strategy is to link sex with violence, as we see in a plethora of cultural images – from all the stories and classical paintings of rapes (Lucrecia, Europa, and so on) to much of contemporary pornography and ‘entertainment’. This erotisation of violence not only serves to maintain male dominance; it reinforces a male socialization for all kinds of violence in a variation of the famous Pavlov findings that when dogs are conditioned to associate food with a ringing bell they will salivate just from the ring of the bell. And of course, violence is integral to dominator systems, as rigid rankings of domination must ultimately be maintained through fear and force.

Still another way sexuality is distorted in dominator systems is to vilify women’s sexuality as dangerous to men. This is a common dogma in both Eastern and Western religions, which equate man with spirit and woman with the supposedly sinful and inferior body.

All this is in sharp contrast to earlier more partnership traditions where sexuality and spirituality were linked. We vividly see this linking in prehistoric art of the “sacred marriage” – and even as late as the Mesopotamian Hymns of Inanna, the revered Goddess of Love and Procreation, celebrating her sexual union with Dumuzi not only in romantic terms but as part of the annual renewal of nature through her life-giving and nurturing powers.

That today many women and men are trying to reclaim these ancient traditions is part of the movement toward partnership.

**SM** In your books, including the most recent *The Real Wealth of Nations* (2008), you have emphasised the partnership values of caring, equality and empathy as the core elements of any fundamental cultural and economic transformation. You suggest that our historical models of economics came out of a system of domination. What do you mean?

**RE:** We inherited economic systems in which, basically, those at top are privileged and those at the bottom get the droppings from the table. If we re-examine the

critique of capitalism as unjust, violent, and exploitive, we see that it is in reality a critique of dominator systems – be they ancient or modern, Western or Eastern, feudal, monarchic, or totalitarian. Long before capitalist billionaires amassed huge fortunes, Egyptian pharaohs and Chinese emperors hoarded their nations' wealth. Indian potentates demanded tributes of silver and gold while lower castes lived in abject poverty. Middle Eastern warlords pillaged, plundered, and terrorised their people. European feudal lords killed their neighbours and oppressed their subjects. A system of top-down rankings has also characterized the two large-scale applications of the socialist "dictatorship of the proletariat": the former Soviet Union and China. Both turned out to be authoritarian, violent, and destructive of nature. And while they alleviated some economic disparities, they were hardly equalitarian (1).

We have to go beyond these old approaches. This does not mean we should discard everything from capitalism and socialism. We need both markets and central planning. But to effectively address our problems, we have to go further and deeper.

A first step is a full-spectrum economic map that no longer excludes the life-sustaining economic sectors: the natural economy, the household economy, and the community volunteer economy. Then we can build an economics of partnerism, a caring economy that gives real visibility and value to the most important human work: caring for people, starting in early childhood, and caring for nature – matters that conventional economic analyses and theories ignore.

**SM** Caring is generally considered 'soft', and therefore economically inefficient. Yet in your work you show that this is a misconception. Can you comment on this?

**RE** People are not used to seeing caring and economy together, but if we think about it, this is a reflection of how accustomed we are to having uncaring values guide economics. We have also been socialised to think that caring is 'soft', 'feminine' – and hence *not* economically effective. In reality, as documented in

my book *The Real Wealth of Nations*, caring policies and practices are very economically effective. And this is especially the case as we move from the industrial to the post-industrial era, when investment in human capacity development is essential for economic success. Not only that, studies show that caring companies do better. For example, companies regularly listed in *Working Mother* or *Fortune500* as the best companies to work for have a substantially higher return to investors.

Investing in caring also pays extremely well for nations. This is why current “austerity” measures are so wrong. We must invest in people, and cuts in child-care, education, health, and so forth are economically suicidal in the long term. It is a matter of priorities, of values – which is why to change economic systems we have to also change the larger culture.

**SM** You write of the movement toward partnership being opposed by a “hidden system of gendered valuations”. Can you elaborate?

**RE** Most people still do not think of gender in relation to economics. But this is beginning to change. For example, there is a growing recognition of a strong correlation between the status of women and a nation’s quality of life.

For instance, a study based on statistics from 89 nations conducted by the Center for Partnership Studies, *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, found that in significant respects the status of women can be a better predictor of general quality of life than Gross Domestic Product or GDP, the conventional measure of a nation’s economic health. Similarly, the annual World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap reports show that countries with a low gender gap are more economically successful.

An obvious reason for this is that women are half the population. But there are systemic reasons – including that as long as the female half of humanity, with whom values such as caring and non-violence are associated, remains subordinate and excluded from social governance, so also will these values.



Also growing is the recognition that we cannot realistically end poverty without addressing the fact that the mass of the world's poor and the poorest of the poor are women and children – and that a major reason for this is that women perform most of the unpaid care work. Not only that, both psychology and neuroscience show that our economic future heavily depends on care and education – hence fiscal support for the care-giving work performed in *both* the market and the household economic sectors is a nation's most cost-effective investment.

When I recently spoke at the United Nations General Assembly in a session on harmony with nature, I pointed out that we cannot realistically expect policies and practices that care for nature as long as caring, starting in early childhood, and keeping a clean and healthy home environment continue to be devalued because they are associated with women and the 'soft' or 'feminine'. What we are really talking about here are the most important human activities, without which we cannot have a sustainable future.

**SM** In establishing the behavioural building blocks that are needed for partnership relationships, education plays a crucial role as it can effectively accelerate “the pain to pleasure shift”, as you call it in your book *Sacred Pleasure*. Also, access to quality education is an important aspect of what you call the “economy of caring”. Yet universities are becoming more and more like vending sites for multinational corporations, and the Humanities are in danger of being lost. What should be particularly valued in the new universities of the future?

**RE** In my book *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, I propose that caring for life – for self, others, and nature – be part of education from pre-school to graduate school. And, of course, the humanities are integral to education. It is a cold and sterile life without literature, art, and music, without feelings, creativity, and a sense of meaning. Yet, as *Tomorrow's Children* points out, the canon of the humanities perpetuates many aspects of dominator

systems, not only in its lack of diversity but in not critically examining beloved philosophers and other writers who present dominator systems as the only alternative, and often glorify domination and violence. The good news is that this is beginning to change, for example through the work of the Partnership Studies scholars at the University of Udine (2). The universities of the future need a more partnership-oriented perspective. The humanities curriculum should include the importance of respect for human rights in both the so-called public sphere of politics and economics and the private sphere of family and other intimate relations. And of course to merit its name, the humanities must give equal importance to both halves of humanity: male and female.

**SM** As a social activist you are the director of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS, California), a non-profit organisation that is linked with numerous initiatives, educational programmes, associations and institutions. What are the upcoming activities you are promoting that people should know about?

**RE** Our CPS programs offer research and education. The Center's Caring Economy Campaign (CEC) focuses on changing economic policies, practices, and measurement. One of its aims is the adoption of more inclusive and accurate measures of economic health by bringing together leading economists to develop Social Wealth economic indicators that show the economic value of caring for people and nature.

A second part of the campaign is building a coalition of organizations representing women, children, faith communities, think tanks, sustainable businesses, and other groups already working for more caring policies and practices. A third part is education, especially our online webinar Caring Economy Leadership Trainings that bring together people from all over the globe. There is information on all this at <http://www.caringeconomy.org> as well as educational materials you can download and use.

This campaign is ever more urgent as automation, robotics, and soon artificial intelligence, continue to take over people's jobs. The only viable solution is an economic system that gives visibility and real value to the work only humans can do: the work of caring for other humans, particularly our children and our growing elderly population, as well as for our increasingly threatened natural environment.

Our other major program is the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV) that I co-founded with Nobel Peace Laureate Betty Williams with the aim of ending traditions of violence in families, especially the global pandemic of violence against women and children that, as we move toward partnership, is finally gaining attention.

There are excellent resources for SAIV, including the "Caring and Connected Parenting Guide" that can be downloaded for free at <http://www.saiv.net>.

One of our goals is engaging spiritual and religious leaders to finally take a strong stand against this intimate violence. This is essential not only because this violence every year blights, and all too often takes, the lives of millions of children and women, but because if family relations based on chronic violations of human rights are considered normal and moral, they provide models for such violations in all relations. If these relations are violent, children learn that violence from those who are more powerful toward those who are less powerful is acceptable as a way of dealing with conflicts or problems – and they learn this not only on an emotional and mental level, but on a neural level.

Our latest initiative is a film now under development based on my life and work, and you can find information at <http://tiroirafilms.wix.com/chalice-or-blade#!home/mainPage>. You can also find resources about other activities, including how you can start a book study and action group, at the CPS website <http://www.partnershipway.org>.

I invite readers to use these resources, and join with me in the exciting, urgently needed enterprise of helping to build that more caring and sustainable partnership future we so need and want.

**NOTES**

(1) Equalitarian denotes social relations in a partnership society where women and men (and “masculine” and “feminine”) are accorded equal value. It differs from the more conventional term “egalitarian” as it traditionally describes equality between men and men (as the works of Locke, Rousseau, and other “rights of man” philosophers, as well as modern history, evidence). For more details see the partnership glossary: [http://www.partnershipway.org/about-cps/foundational-concepts/the-challenge-of-](http://www.partnershipway.org/about-cps/foundational-concepts/the-challenge-of-language/SACRED%20PLEASURE%20glossary%201oct.pdf/view)

[language/SACRED%20PLEASURE%20glossary%201oct.pdf/view](http://www.partnershipway.org/about-cps/foundational-concepts/the-challenge-of-language/SACRED%20PLEASURE%20glossary%201oct.pdf/view)

(2) Partnership Studies Group (PSG, Udine University): [http://all.uniud.it/?page\\_id=195](http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195).

**Stefano Mercanti** is Research Fellow, member of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) and associate editor of the online journal on modern literatures *Le Simplegadi* at the University of Udine (Italy). He has published widely on world literatures in English and Partnership Studies, including *The Rose and the Lotus. Partnership Studies in the Works of Raja Rao* (Rodopi, 2009) and, as co-editor, the volume *Partnership Id-Entities: Cultural and Literary Re-inscription/s of the Feminine* (Forum, 2010). He is the author of the partnership glossaries for Riane Eisler's Italian editions of *The Chalice and the Blade* (Forum, 2011) and *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth and the Politics of the Body* (Forum, 2012). He is currently working on South Asian-Australian writers.

His email is: [stefano.mercanti@uniud.it](mailto:stefano.mercanti@uniud.it)