

**CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION:
CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION
AND HUMAN AGENCY**

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Riane Eisler is an eminent social scientist, attorney, and author best known for her best-seller *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*, now in twenty-three foreign editions, including most European languages and Chinese, Russian, Korean, Hebrew, Japanese, and Arabic.

Her newest book, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* – hailed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking,” by Peter Senge as “desperately needed,” by Gloria Steinem as “revolutionary,” and by Jane Goodall as “a call for action” – proposes a new approach to economics that gives visibility and value to the most essential human work: the work of caring for people and planet.

Dr Eisler is sought after to keynote conferences worldwide, and is a consultant to business and government on applications of the partnership model introduced in her work. Her other books include the award-winning *The Power of Partnership and Tomorrow's Children*, as well as *Sacred Pleasure*, a daring reexamination of sexuality and spirituality, and *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life*, documenting the key role of women's status in a nation's general quality of life.

Dr Eisler is the only woman among twenty great thinkers including Hegel, Adam Smith, Marx, and Toynbee selected for inclusion in *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians* in recognition of the lasting importance of her work as a cultural historian and evolutionary theorist. She has received many honors, including honorary PhD degrees, and is included in the award-winning book *Great Peacemakers*, as one of twenty leaders for world peace, along with Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King.

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HOW CAN WE MOVE TO A MORE SUSTAINABLE, peaceful, and equitable future? Today the answer to this question is in *Critical* ways more important than ever before.

As we see all around us, many of the policy choices being made today are driving us toward an evolutionary dead end. But there is also in our time of rapid technological flux and social disequilibrium an opportunity for evolutionary breakthrough rather than breakdown – if adequate attention is given to the fact that most of our choices, including the choices of policy-makers, are profoundly, and to a large extent unconsciously, affected by the culture into which we are born.

The *cultural transformation theory* I introduced examines our individual and social choices from the new perspective of the domination and partnership systems as two basic possibilities for human culture. Based on a study of 25,000 years of the span of human life on this earth, cultural transformation theory provides a new action-oriented theory of cultural evolution that can be applied to meet the epochal challenges we face (Eisler, 1987, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2007; Eisler and Loye, 1992).

The departure point for cultural transformation theory is biological evolution: the recognition that humans are part of the continuum of life forms in nature. But while the neo-Darwinian emphasis in the study of evolution has been on the organism's reaction or adaptation to a changing environment, my focus is on the organism as an active originator of change. Indeed, I argue that our appearance on the evolutionary scene initiates an age of co-creation or co-evolution (Eisler 1990, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002).

I also emphasize another evolutionary development not generally recognized: that we humans are biologically equipped to derive enormous rewards of pleasure from caring connections – without which, because of our uniquely long childhood helplessness, we can not even survive. Throughout our history, we find evidence of our powerful life-long yearning for love and pleasure, as well as our profound yearning, only

→ | WITNESS

“ We are
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JONI MITCHELL

in rudimentary evidence in other life forms, for beauty, truth, and an equitable and peaceful way of living (Eisler 1995, 2000, 2007). In short, love, caring, and creativity as just as rooted in our biology as are violent competition and destructiveness – indeed, our strong human need to love and be loved, to create and care, is what most distinguishes our species.

The basic question that faces us at this critical juncture in our evolution is therefore what kind of social, economic, and cultural structure will support and enhance, rather than inhibit and distort, the expression and actualization of these uniquely human needs and potentials. Equally important, what changes in human consciousness – and thus actions – can help us move toward such a structure.

CONSCIOUSNESS
AND SOCIAL CAT-
EGORIES

Categories help us organize the barrage of sensory information we're faced with, starting in infancy. But while categories help us make sense of what's happening both inside and outside us, they also often limit what we perceive.

Some categories are part of our biological equipment, for example, hot or cold and hunger or satiation. But many more categories are culturally constructed. As linguistic psychologist Robert Ornstein writes in *The Psychology of Consciousness*, every language provides categories that mold consciousness.

Every conventional social category – religious or secular, rightist or leftist, capitalist or communist, technologically developed or undeveloped, Eastern or Western – only describes particular aspects of a social system. None of them describe the *totality* of the institutions, assumptions, beliefs, relationships, and activities that constitute a social system. They don't even take into account the importance

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 not only essential for survival but, profoundly affect how we come to think, feel, and, as we are now finding out from neuroscience, nothing less than our brain development.

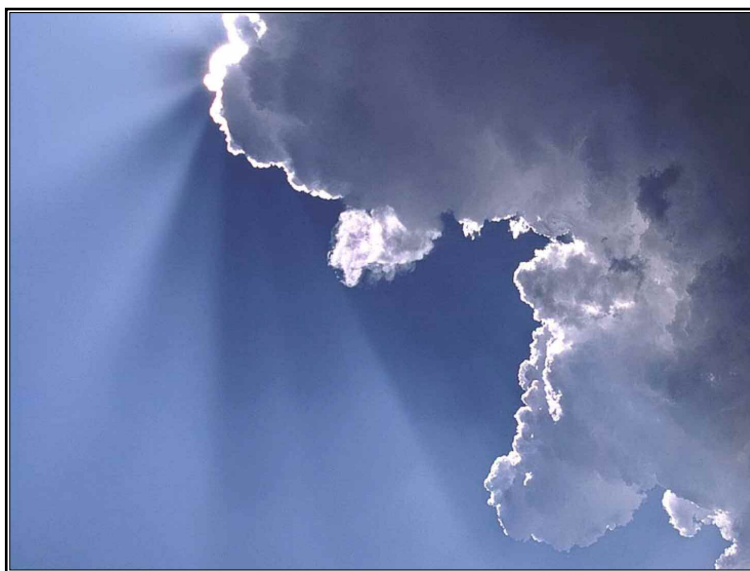
Cultural transformation theory introduces two new social categories that take these matters into full account: the

domination system and the *partnership system*. It counters the popular notion of cultural evolution as a linear progression from “barbarism” to “civilization.” Instead, it provides a narrative more congruent with what we actually see in history. It shows that all through our cultural evolution – from prehistory to our times – we find the underlying tension

between the partnership and domination systems as two basic «attractors» for social organization on a *partnership-dominator continuum*.

A central tenet of cultural transformation theory is that how our primary relations – the relations between women and men and between parents and children are structured are of central social significance. It challenges the notion that the most important aspects of a society are those that can be understood by

only studying the so-called public sphere of political and economic relations, with scant attention to the so-called private sphere of family, sexual, and other intimate relations. It posits that, on the contrary, it is through these relations that we unconsciously form the basic habits of feeling, thinking, and acting that operate in all our relations, from intimate relations in the so-called private sphere to international relations in the so-called public sphere.



Cultural transformation theory further shows that the ability to recognize patterns of partnership and domination in our psyches, in our relations, and in our society is a prerequisite to imaging more humane and effective ways of structuring human relations and institutions – and that such a restructuring is crucial for our world today.

In short, by identifying patterns and interconnections not visible using earlier theoretical frameworks, cultural transformation theory opens up the realistic possibility of fundamental cultural transformation through a shift to societies orienting primarily to the partnership rather than domination system — and with this, the possibility of more peaceful and equitable relations, environmental balance, and the greater realization of our unique human potentials.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

We are used to thinking of matters pertaining to gender roles and relations as secondary so-called “women’s issues.” But what kinds of gender roles and relations are presented by a society as natural is a major mediating force between individual agency and social structure. Understanding this hidden dynamic is essential for both prediction and intervention.

Children universally form patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting based in large part on how the roles and relations of the two halves of humanity are socially constructed. After all, every child is born either female or male. And dominator gender stereotypes provide the very early social cues for how women and men should feel, think, and behave so that a dominator system is maintained.

I want to emphasize that what we are here dealing with has nothing to do with anything inherent in women or men. The problem is one of cultural conditioning for a particular kind of social organization. For example, studies contradict the assumption that testosterone inevitably leads men to express frustration and anger violently. In fact, there are studies indicating that when men who have low testosterone levels are given testosterone they actually become less violent¹. What is critical is what kinds of social cues we receive in connection with hormonal arousal, which in the dominator model are equated with domination and violence – a lesson constantly taught boys, beginning with war toys when they are children to lifelong stories of the hero as killer.

As we see all around us in the movement of women into roles once reserved for men and the movement of men toward more stereotypically “feminine” activities such as childcare, both women and men are capable of assuming roles that are in dominator thinking assigned solely to one sex or the other. So the problem is socialization for dominator “femininity” and masculinity” – with the latter requiring a distancing of men from anything considered “soft” or “effeminate.”

This helps explain why the social psychologists David Winter and David McClelland both found that the intensified replication and amplification of stereotypes of dominator masculinity characteristically precedes periods of aggressive warfare and/or repression (McClelland 1980; Winter 1973). It also helps explain why during the dominator regression of the last decades of the 20th century we find the massive

replication and amplification of stories and images eroticizing domination and violence (Eisler 1995).

The unconscious internalization of a higher valuing of men and the stereotypically “masculine” also helps explain why in times of dominator regression we see a pulling back from the public funding of activities stereotypically considered “soft” or “feminine.” At the same time that the allocation of funds for caring for children, the elderly, people’s health, and the environment (all stereotypical “women’s work”) are slashed, funds are made available for building weapons, wars, and other stereotypical “men’s work.” (Eisler, 2007)

The relationship between teaching dominator gender roles and relations and regressions toward the dominator model also helps explain why a return to the «traditional» family (traditional being a code word for a male-dominated, authoritarian family) is a major priority for many leaders of so-called religious fundamentalism today, be they Muslim or Christian. It explains why this was also a rallying cry of both Hitler and Stalin.

Conversely, in the case of Scandinavian nations such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland, we can see that the higher status of women helps explain why these nations were able to institute policies giving priority to “soft” or caring activities, such as healthcare, childcare, and parental leave – and thus consistently have had high quality of life ratings in United Nations Human Development Reports, the World Economic Competitiveness Reports, and other global measures (Eisler, Loye, and Norgaard, 1995, Eisler, 2007).

As noted earlier, cultural transformation theory proposes that another major hidden mediator between human agency and dominator systems formation and maintenance is the replication of childrearing methods that make relations not based on hierarchies of domination not «feel right.» In its more extreme or «pure» dominator form, this is a process that produces the unconscious state clinicians call post-traumatic stress syndrome and I call the dominator trance.

Like the replication of dominator gender stereotypes, this replication of trauma through dominator childrearing functions primarily on an unconscious level. It is embedded in entrenched traditions that – as in the biblical adage «spare the rod and spoil the child» – have long been considered natural, and even moral.

Basically, a pure domination system can be viewed as a trauma factory, since the way it structures human relations – particularly intimate relations that involve touch to the body beginning in early infancy – tends to produce chronic post traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, if we look at what we today call trauma, we see that for the last several thousand years what during the Middle Ages was aptly referred to as an “earthly vale of tears” was considered by many people as “just the way things are.” Hence, to speak of trauma during the Middle Ages would have been just as incomprehensible as speaking about human rights. Neither concept has meaning in a system orienting closely to the dominator side of the partnership-dominator continuum.

For example, the inquisitions and witch hunts of the medieval Church, the drawings and quarterings used to punish rebels and other “criminals” by the medieval state, the chopping off of hands for thefts by medieval law, the

extreme economic deprivation of the mass of people who were serfs, the generally unsanitary and unhealthy living conditions, as well as the accepted brutal treatment of serfs in feudal fiefs – not to speak of women and children in households – are all situations that we today would describe as traumatic and, even beyond this, that clinicians identify as causative factors in chronic post traumatic stress disorders.

Even as late as the early 1800s, when there began to be some doubts about child beating as sound pedagogy, there was still a debate among educators whether, as a substitute for beatings, children should be taught to understand that “the parents’ will is supreme” by tying a child to a chair and/or lightly burning its hand with hot tea². That is, the replication of dominator childrearing was still advocated by some “experts.”

More extreme recent examples are the deforming foot-binding of girls in pre-revolutionary China and the genital mutilation that still maims millions of girls in parts of Africa and Asia today – brutal practices replicated as valuable cultural traditions. Also perpetuating a dominator mindset are the madrases in Muslim nations where boys are beaten and maltreated in the name of fundamentalist religious education.

In sharp contrast, the second half of the 20th century has seen the growing understanding from scientific findings that traumatizing children has extremely adverse life-long effects. This is an important partnership trend.

But we are also seeing, as part of dominator regression, the renewed advocacy of abusive and violent childrearing in the name of religious morality. For example, claiming this will ensure children are “more faithful to God,” there are today a slew of “Christian” parenting books, tapes, and workshops that tell parents they must counteract “child-centered” parenting. Under the guise of morality, they admonish parents not to “overindulge” their children and instead follow “God’s way” – which they claim means teaching babies “high chair manners” through physical “chastisement,” forcing children as young as 8 months to sit with their hands on the side of their trays or on their laps, and forbidding any kind of fussiness – in other words, arbitrarily imposing parental domination through fear and force (Rosin, 1999).

Clearly this attempt to replicate and amplify dominator childrearing has to be exposed as what it is: cruel abuse to the little children directly affected and a danger to all of our future. Even more important, as I have proposed in my book *Tomorrow’s Children* and other writings, we need to institute courses on sound parenting in all our schools worldwide – particularly in light of the findings from neuroscience of the lifelong effects of either what I call partnership or dominator early childrearing on such vital matters as capacity to learn and to love, ability to be venturesome and creative rather than just take orders, and propensity to use violence (Perry *et al.*, 1996).

THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

The social construction of the two foundational templates for human relations – the relations between parent and child and woman and man – are very different in times and places orienting more to a dominator or a partnership model of society. In societies that orient closely to the domination system, these two foundational relations are structured in such a way that people learn early on, on the

most basic unconscious, bodily, level that what happens to the body of one type of person is legitimately to be decided by someone else (Eisler, 1995).

Dominator politics of the body are unconsciously internalized by children early on through dominator childrearing. As neuroscientists tell us, this may even be on a cellular, neurological, biochemical level, incorporated into the neural organization of the brain, which we now know to a large extent takes place after birth during the first years of life.

This feeling that dominator relations are natural is then culturally reinforced through dominator beliefs (myths and images) and institutions (educational, economic, etc.). And again on an unconscious bodily level, it is further reinforced through other dominator intimate relations, particularly sexual relations modeled on the dominator template.

In short, if we put together what we are today discovering about how both physical and psychological trauma alter body chemistry and brain development with an understanding of the hidden dynamics of dominator systems maintenance, we can better understand how people unconsciously replicate precisely the kinds of beliefs and institutional forms that cause them misery and pain (Eisler, 1995).

These processes relating to intimate relations play a major role as mediating dynamics between human agency and the maintenance of social systems orienting to domination. Together with other mediating dynamics such as the myths and stories we are taught as knowledge and truth as well as education and economics, this dominator templating of the foundational human relations in large part accounts for the dominator trance – a constriction of consciousness that makes dominating or being dominated seem the only alternatives.

This constriction of consciousness interferes with both men’s and women’s profound yearning for caring connections. It also interferes with the realization of our yearning for a more equitable and less violent way of living, and with the implementation of more humane and rational social and economic policies.

HUMAN AGENCY AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION: FROM DOMINATION TO PARTNERSHIP

Our global crises cannot be solved within the system that has given rise to them. From the perspective of cultural transformation theory, the problem is not, as we are sometimes told, one of modern technology, but of the mix of high technology with a dominator social and cultural organization (Eisler, 1987, 1990, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2007).

The once hallowed “conquest of nature,” the violent conquest and domination of other humans, the global arms trade, the overbreeding that has led to the population explosion, the inequitable misdistribution of resources – all these could be changed through rational policies and actions. But the issue is not one of reason, but of the hidden dynamics that serve to replicate precisely the kind of social and cultural organization that has led to our global crises.

As we have seen, cultural transformation theory identifies two basic templates that transcend conventional classifications based on right versus left, religious versus secular, capitalist versus communist, level of technological development,

time, and geography: the domination system and the partnership system. It makes it possible to see that the degree to which a society orients to one or the other of these systems on what I call the partnership-dominator continuum is critical to whether a society will be more equitable or inequitable, more authoritarian or democratic, more peaceful or warlike.

Cultural transformation theory also traces the tension throughout our cultural evolution between the partnership and domination systems in terms of what, in the language of nonlinear dynamics, we may call two attractors. While my earlier work drew primarily from data on Western prehistory and history, cultural transformation theory was tested by Chinese scholars at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing for its application to Asian history, and similar patterns were found (Min, 1995). Moreover, as I document in *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century*, all world regions have myths and stories about an earlier more partnership-oriented time, which is our common human cultural heritage.

The general sequence outlined by cultural transformation theory is as follows:

- 1 - During a period of massive disequilibrium linked to severe climate changes and environmental degradation as well as large scale population movements in prehistory, a shift from a partnership to a dominator direction in the mainstream of cultural evolution radically altered the course of civilization. For example, there is a general lack of fortifications and imagery idealizing warfare in the early Neolithic (and in some places as late as the Bronze Age). Thereafter, massive fortifications and imagery idealizing warfare appear, as well as major changes in all mythical images and stories, with a cumulating idealization, and even sacralization, of the infliction and/or suffering of pain.
- 2 - During most of recorded history, the partnership system has been subsumed by the domination system. There have been intermittent periods of partnership resurgence (e.g., early Christianity) in the West followed by periods of dominator regression (e.g., the Crusades, Inquisition, and witch burnings of the rigidly male-dominated, hierarchic, authoritarian, and highly violent subsequent orthodox Church).
- 3 - During modern history, along with the disequilibrium of the industrial revolution, the tension between the partnership and domination systems intensified. A powerful partnership resurgence becomes the major trend for this period. We find the cumulating challenge to entrenched traditions of domination by progressive movements worldwide. Sequentially, for example, we find the 17th and 18th centuries challenge to the “divinely ordained” right of kings to rule their “subjects”; the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries challenge to the “divinely ordained” right of men to rule over the women and children in the “castles of their homes”; the 19th and 20th centuries challenge to the control of one race by another through the abolitionist, civil rights, and anti-colonialist movements; the 19th century pacifist movement and the 20th century peace movement; the 19th century feminist and 20th century women’s liberation and women’s rights

movements; the 19th and 20th centuries movements for social and economic justice, and most recently, the 20th century indigenous rights and environmental movements and the movement worldwide challenging violence against women and children.

This cumulating movement toward partnership general systems guidance, however, has been countered by massive dominator systems resistance and punctuated by periodic regressions (e.g., Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Khomeini’s Muslim fundamentalist Iran, the Taliban of Afghanistan, the so-called Christian right in the United States, etc.).

- 4 - Even though this struggle between partnership resurgence and dominator resistance/regression is still obscured by conventional systems of classification such as right versus left, capitalism versus communism, religious versus secular, etc., largely due to ever more rapid technological change, today it is coming to a head.

CONCLUSION

At our level of technological development we are on a collision course between the requirements of dominator systems maintenance and human species maintenance – a critical bifurcation that offers both unprecedented challenges and unprecedented opportunities for fundamental cultural transformation.

The disequilibrium entailed in the move to a new technological phase change based on nuclear, electronic, and biochemical technological breakthroughs is both a crisis and an opportunity. It is a crisis because we are at a point where the mix of a domination system’s guidance of policies and high technology is not sustainable. But it is also an opportunity because it is during periods of great disequilibrium that fundamental change is possible (Eisler, 1987, 1990, 1997, 2000).

In the last analysis, whether the development and use of our powerful technologies is governed by partnership or dominator social guidance is up to us – to whether or not we consciously chose to do everything in our power to accelerate the shift from a dominator to a partnership world. As cultural transformation theory emphasizes, this shift will not lead to an ideal, or even completely violence free, society. But it will take us to a society in which violence and domination are no longer institutionalized, in which they are not idealized as heroic or manly, and in which the infliction and suffering of pain are not sacralized as “the will of the gods.”

In this more partnership-oriented society, stereotypically feminine values, such as caring and nonviolence, and stereotypical “women’s work,” such as caring for children, for a family’s health, and ensuring that we have a clean and aesthetic environment, will no longer be relegated to a secondary place in the guiding social and economic policies. And both women and men will recognize that what distinguishes us as a species is not our “superior” capacity to inflict pain but our unique human capacity to strive for justice, beauty, and love.

*Parts of this article contain excerpts from an article that appeared in *The Evolutionary Outrider: The Impact of the Human Agent on Evolution*, David Loye, editor, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998. © 2008 Riane Eisler.

¹ Study conducted by Dr. Christina Wang at the University of California, Los Angeles, reported in *Newsweek*, July 3, 1995.

² K. Taylor (1987), "Blessing the House," *Journal of Psychobiology* 12:443-444.

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