



Peace Begins at Home:
Riane Eisler's Partnership Model
for a Humane Future

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
&
Riane Eisler

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 25, 2026

Preface: Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Peace Begins at Home: Riane Eisler's Partnership Model for a Humane Future is based on an extended discussion with Riane Eisler. Rarely does a single scholar introduce a framework both conceptually simple and strong enough to be tested against what is already known.

Most new fields emerge through the accumulation of fresh evidence or through reframing existing evidence with an apt lens that reduces noise. Partnership Studies, as developed by Riane, belongs to this second category. It does not depend on discovering a new archive so much as on reorganizing our reading of the archives we already have across culture, economics, education, history, law, politics, neuroscience, and psychology.

This anthology is a collection of thematic conversations applying Eisler's partnership–domination continuum across major human systems, e.g., culture, the economy, governance, the home, law, and school, and most importantly, normative values. It is presented less as a linear deductive argument than a partnership systems tour. Each conversation takes up a larger slice of Eisler's lifework. Readers can evaluate the explanatory power of each domain on its own merits.

The frames are about a hypothesis of a partnership-dominance orientation continuum and its reflection in individuals and societies. Two ideas recur throughout.

First is the central hypothesis, which can be summarized as peace begins at home, or in the proverbial house, which can be literal or extended to the culture at large. Neither sentimentalism nor sloganeering, this is a hypothesis about how early relational patterns influence later social trust or social fear, democratic habits or authoritarian reflexes, or rewarded mutuality or normalized coercion. It draws heavily from neuroscientific studies, and is based on Eisler's methodology of the study of relational or interactive dynamics through which either partnership-oriented or domination-oriented societies maintain and reproduce themselves.

Second are Eisler's "four cornerstones" for shifting systems, i.e., family and childhood, gender, economics, and narrative and language. These function as the analytical spine of the anthology.

The chapters move from core framework into deep history and prehistory, confronting popular myths that portray violence and conquest as the default engine of human development. We track domination systems that reproduce themselves through predictable mechanisms, including fear-based control, rigid gender, family, and economic roles, and violence, starting in domination-oriented families, which normalize violence and fear.

Partnership, at the other antipode, offers a caring economics, cultures of nonviolence, "power with" leadership, and restorative justice. Not perfect societies, Eisler emphasizes, but more equitable, environmentally sustainable, and just ones.

Narrative here becomes infrastructure. Language, stories, and symbols encode domination or partnership models of the world, individually, then distributively, echoing throughout the social music of the society. These chapters take the real world as the anchor for inference and conceptualization. The material draws from multiple disciplines, including archaeology, economics, history, neuroscience, and law. The closer to the contemporary era, the stronger the

evidence, because of better tools and less degradation of human activity due to entropy and the passage of time.

Readers can approach the book in several ways. Those who want a fast conceptual on-ramp may begin with the framework and its applications to economics, childhood, and violence. For others, the focus on institutions around caring economics can shift to authoritarian dynamics, control-based leadership, and criminal law.

The interviews in this anthology are an invitation into the world of a thought leader, a Jewish woman Holocaust survivor in the latter portions of life's journey.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 25, 2026

Partnership Studies 1: Dominator and Partnership Models

Riane Eisler, an Austrian-born American systems scientist, futurist, attorney, and human rights advocate, is renowned for her influential work on cultural transformation and gender equity. Best known for *The Chalice and the Blade*, she introduced the partnership vs. dominator models of social organization. She has received many honours, including the *Republic of Austria's Cross of Honor for Science and Art*, the *Nuclear Peace Leadership Award*, earlier awarded to the Dalai Lama, the *Centers for Compassion Humanitarian Award*, and the *Humanist Pioneer Award*, is President of the Center for Partnership Systems, and Editor in Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* at the University of Minnesota. The three books of hers of note that could be highlighted are *The Chalice and the Blade*—now in its 57th U.S. printing with 30 foreign editions, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, and *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

In conversation with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler emphasized the urgent need for us to focus on values-based systems and the transformative power of caring economics. Drawing from neuroscience and history, she argues that peace begins at home and calls for a shift in worldview to build more equitable, sustainable, and compassionate societies rooted in connection, not control. Eisler shares her personal journey and groundbreaking systems analysis that redefines how we understand politics, economics, gender, and social change.

Drawing from her childhood escape from Nazi-occupied Austria, Eisler explains her framework of the domination-partnership social scale. She argues that genuine transformation requires examining four cornerstones: family and childhood, gender roles, economic values, and cultural narratives/language. Highlighting how authoritarian structures perpetuate violence and trauma, she calls for a shift toward partnership systems rooted in empathy, equity, and relations of mutuality rather than in-group versus out-group thinking and acting. Eisler's work invites us to rethink progress through a truly whole-systems perspective. This interview was conducted June 21, 2025.

Riane Eisler: Would you like me to begin with a personal note? Because that is what I would like to do.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Please do.

Eisler: I have a great deal of passion for this work of systems analysis and for spreading what I call the partnership-domination social scale—a new way of looking at the world. That's where it all starts: our worldview and how we live in this world. Systems can change from what I have called a domination-oriented to a partnership-oriented model. That passion is deeply rooted in my childhood.

And, yes, I include childhood and family—areas that are not usually part of the conventional discourse about politics, economics, climate change, and so on—in my analysis as fundamental. It began in my childhood. I was born in Vienna, Austria, and as a small child, I and my parents fled the Nazis after the German annexation of Austria in 1938. That experience—escaping the horrors that many did not escape—shaped me profoundly.

I witnessed cruelty and violence firsthand. I remember the night when the Gestapo came to our home and took my father away. But I also saw what I now call spiritual courage. My mother found the courage to resist out of love. She recognized one of the men as a young Austrian who had once run errands for the family business, she confronted him and demanded the release of my father. My mother could have been arrested or killed. Many Jewish people were rounded up or killed that night. It was during the November pogrom, known as Kristallnacht—"the Night of Broken Glass"—because of all the glass shattered in Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses. By a miracle—and yes, by bribing the officials—she succeeded in having my father released.

Seeing these two human possibilities—cruelty and compassion—led me to a lifelong question that underlies my research: *Does it have to be this way? Must there be so much cruelty, insensitivity, and violence when humans have such an enormous capacity for caring, empathy, and peace?* It is revealing, is it not, that we do not even have a word for nonviolence that does not contain the word "violence"?

Years later, to answer whether domination is inevitable or whether an alternative is possible—given our human capacity for caring, consciousness, and connection—I embarked on a whole-systems analysis. I realized immediately that I could not answer my childhood questions using the usual categories: right and left, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern, capitalist and socialist. After all, history shows us brutal, oppressive, and authoritarian regimes under every one of these labels. So, none of these categories tells us what we must build instead.

And here is something that might surprise you: I realized that what I—and much of social discourse—had long taken for granted, namely the marginalization or outright neglect of family relations and childhood, needed to be brought to the very center of our understanding of social systems and cultural transformation.

The marginalization—at best—of nothing less than the majority of humanity, namely women and children, is central. We cannot understand human societies without examining our origins and our families. Children usually spend their earliest and most formative years within families, right? As I write in my latest book, *Nurturing Our Humanity*, which came out with Oxford University Press in 2019, we know this from nothing less than neuroscience. We know that our brains are not fully formed at birth and that we acquire our worldviews—our paradigms, if you will—long before we have fully developed brains, much less mature critical capacities.

To make a long story short, this systems analysis led me to define two primary cultural configurations: the partnership system and the domination system. Of course, no society is completely oriented to one or the other; there is always a mix. However, these configurations encompass family, gender relations, and other domains that we have been taught—and are still taught—to marginalize. We cannot understand our past, our present, or—most importantly—the possibilities for our future, without a systems analysis that connects these dots. That is what led me to develop the partnership-domination social scale.

Jacobsen: When you are looking at this partnership-domination social scale, what are the key factors that form its core structure—the elements that everything else tends to grow from?

Eisler: I will start with some examples. If you look at the Taliban and fundamentalist Iran—both Eastern religious societies—or if you look at Hitler's Nazi Germany, or Stalin's USSR, Western secular societies, of Putin's Russia today or even the new regime here in the United States right now, they all lean heavily toward the domination side of the spectrum. Even though they differ in religion, geography, or ideology—Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern, secular, religious, and so on—think about it for a moment: what do they all have in common?

First—and this takes us back to the fundamentals—they share a top-down, authoritarian structure in both the family and society at large, including their economic systems. Why have we not been taught to include this in our analyses? Yet, as I said, neuroscience shows us that nothing less than our early experiences shape our brains. The second factor is gender, which again has been marginalized.

Gender is not just a so-called "women's issue" or now also a "men's issue"—which, of course, makes it an issue for everyone, including those who do not fit neatly into either category. Gender is a fundamental organizing principle in families, societies, and economies. All of these foundational elements are interconnected, and there are four main ones.

First, we have the structure of family and childhood, which largely shapes the structure of society because the two are intrinsically connected. Second, we have gender. What do children learn in a family or culture that leans toward the domination side? They learn to equate difference—starting with the difference in form between the male and female body—with rigid gender stereotypes and strict hierarchies, leaving no room for anything in between. And they learn to rank male and “masculine” over female and feminine. They learn to equate this difference with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated, with serving or being served.

So, what you get in domination systems—beginning with gender—is in-group versus out-group thinking. Our human capacity for empathy, which is an evolutionary trait, must either be suppressed entirely for the out-group or, at best, compartmentalized.

Now, the third element—and this is crucial—is violence. Domination systems are fundamentally maintained through fear and the threat or infliction of pain. This has numerous ramifications, as I have emphasized, because all these elements are interconnected. Domination-oriented societies have built-in mechanisms to perpetuate themselves through various forms of abuse—ranging from violence against women and children to abuse in workplaces to organized social violence such as warfare, pogroms, and lynchings.

Consider again the Taliban: their oppression is deeply rooted in rigid gender control. The same is true of Iran under Khomeini and other fundamentalist regimes. Hitler's Nazi regime placed enormous emphasis on controlling women and enforcing strict gender roles—though this aspect is often overlooked in mainstream discourse because, whether people lean left or right politically, our dominant economic and political theories have long marginalized gender. Marx, for instance, considered the so-called "woman question" secondary to the "working man's" struggle—though he might have thought differently today, given the progress of international women's movements and shifts in consciousness.

The fourth element is what stories are considered normative. Many of our inherited stories about human nature come from rigid, authoritarian, violent dominator times. They teach us that human nature is inherently bad or selfish. But this is simply untrue. The entire debate of "nature versus nurture" is misleading: it is not nature *or* nurture—it is nature *and* nurture. Nurture determines, as some of the research I cite in *Nurturing Our Humanity* shows, which of our genetic potentials are expressed or suppressed.

Genes do play a role, but they constantly interact with what is fundamentally a human creation: culture. Look at stories like blaming Eve or Pandora for all of humanity's ills—these myths perfectly reflect the marginalization of women and reinforce the domination system's worldview. So, we must begin questioning these stories, connecting the dots, and bringing back into focus what has long been ignored: childhood, family, and gender.

Once we do this, we have a framework for both tactics—addressing the constant crises domination systems produce—and for strategies—building long-term change. This is why my work identifies four cornerstones: family and childhood, gender, economics (specifically, what we reward and label as productive or unproductive work), and story and language.

It is so telling, is it not, that so much of what we consider "productive" ignores what sustains life? Caring and connection are vital from the moment we are born. Yet, in many economic models, this essential work is undervalued or invisible. Therefore, redefining what we consider productive or reproductive labour is crucial. And, of course, how we use stories and language shapes everything.

Jacobsen: So, what about the axes of individuals? Do you feel or think that we need to create new stories when many freer societies are, in various ways—though not in every respect—moving away from dominator structures and processes, whether you are talking about individuals or how society sees itself and functions?

Eisler: Absolutely. But before we can present or create new stories, we need a transformation of our worldview. I know that is possible because it happened to me. I have a background also as an attorney. One day, the partner in the Beverly Hills entertainment law firm I was working for called me into his office to compliment me—or so he thought. He said, "You don't think like a woman."

I took it as a compliment at the time. That shows you where my consciousness was—I identified with the so-called masculine. This segregation into so-called "feminine" and "masculine" qualities is something we need to reexamine. And we are seeing this change all around us again and again. Think of all the men today who are fathering in ways that were once seen as exclusively mothering—diapering babies, feeding babies.

This is fundamental. As I have mentioned, it serves as an organizing principle for families, societies, and economies.

Jacobsen: Are there areas that you find are still understudied about this theoretical framework for analyzing systems of partnership and domination in the world?

Eisler: You have to consider what real whole-systems analysis entails—and what often passes for it. I was, by the way, exposed to that very early in my career. One of my first jobs was with an offshoot of the RAND Corporation, the Systems Development Corporation. This was eons ago. They thought they were doing systems work, but, of course, they were leaving out gender. They were leaving out family. They were leaving out childhood. They were not connecting the dots. But the concept of systems stayed with me.

Even being trained as an attorney, which I am, taught me systems thinking. In law school, you are taught how to brief a case. But in reality, a client does not come to you and say, "Please apply Section 1222 of this or that code to my situation." The client comes with a story, and it is up to the attorney to determine which laws, precedents, regulations, and statutes apply.

I had extensive training in systems analysis. When I discovered feminism—which I fully embrace, though I often avoid the term because it can sound separatist—I realized we need to transform gender stereotypes for both women *and* men. Men do not have it so good in a domination system either. Just think about it.

You have to give your whole self—nothing less than your life—because some man at the top, like Putin, demands it. Right? And this is fundamental: to be considered a "real man" in domination systems, you have to suppress your humanity.

Jacobsen: Yes. So it is not only women who suffer—it is men, too. Would you argue, then, that in domination-oriented societies, this suppression of men's humanity is not only required but is actually at the root of the system?

Eisler: Oh, it is required, and my analysis shows how it is systematically suppressed. I was interviewed by *Scientific American*, for example, not long ago about why there is such a strong connection between trauma in families—where it all starts—and authoritarian societies. Yes, many leaders of institutions that are regressing toward domination are themselves deeply traumatized. But really, we are all traumatized to some degree in domination systems.

Domination systems are trauma factories. They begin with the misallocation of resources. There is always money for the so-called "masculine"—for wars, for weapons, and so on. However, there is somehow never enough money for caring for people, particularly for caring for children. Caring is coded feminine, and devalued, in the domination worldview. This makes no sense. Yet, it is deeply embedded in the system.

So, when you do accurate systems analysis, you must connect the dots. You cannot just point at one factor and say, "This is the cause." We are hosting a summit called "*Peace Begins at Home*" on October 29, 2025. We will feature speakers from around the world. It is an amazing virtual event—and you, of course, are invited. The point of it is to emphasize that we cannot keep using only linear cause-and-effect thinking. For complex living systems, we need to draw on newer theoretical frameworks, such as chaos theory, nonlinear dynamics, and self-organization theory.

My work relates to these. That is not to say that linear analysis has no value, there are always intervening variables. But if we study living systems like societies, we miss the point if we fail to

connect their key components. I have introduced a new methodology: the study of relational dynamics.

First, what kinds of relationships does a given type of society encourage or suppress? That is a fundamental question. Second, how do the major components of that society interconnect to either support or inhibit a particular pattern of relationships across all its institutions? That is genuine whole-systems analysis—and it is not as complicated as some think.

The real struggle for our future is not between right and left. Look at Stalin's regime, for example—his wife committed suicide because of how deeply entangled he was in maintaining a domination system. This connects to the larger structure. The real struggle is between the regression and perpetuation of domination systems and the advancement of partnership systems.

Those invested in domination have a very coherent worldview that starts with controlling family and childhood—how you "raise" your children. Gender is a massive piece of it, yet it is so fragmented in our mainstream discourse. We must integrate all of this to see the whole picture.

Jacobsen: Including economics?

Eisler: Economics, as practiced in domination systems, is domination economics—whether it is an ancient Chinese emperor, an Arab sheikh, an Indian maharaja, a feudal lord, or so-called neoliberalism, which is neither new nor liberal. They are geniuses at co-opting terms and coining phrases that mask reality. What is neoliberalism? It conditions people to accept a system in which those at the bottom must content themselves with the scraps that, quite literally, in feudal times fell from the opulent tables of those at the top.

Jacobsen: Do you have any final thoughts for this first session based on the overview we have just covered?

Eisler: Well, this overview must end with the four cornerstones. Because without addressing them, we are just treading water. I was speaking to a friend of mine who now works to help progressive NGOs defend themselves against hacking, surveillance, and appropriation. This is true—it is big business under the current system. But it does not fundamentally change anything.

We have to understand, as I said earlier, that the real struggle for our future is not between right and left, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern. There are religious movements, such as Unitarian Universalism, which are very accepting. The Bahá'í Faith tries to move in that direction. Some mystical traditions focus on the core teachings of Jesus—on caring and compassion, the so-called feminine principles. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.* But in most religions, scriptures also contain overlays of domination teachings.

The struggle for our future lies between regression to domination—anchored in a concrete framework that encompasses childhood, gender, economics, narrative, and language—and the move toward a partnership system. Examine our fragmented movements: the gender equality movement, the environmental movement, the relatively recent children's rights movement, the push for economic equity, and the movement to value diversity. Why do you think there is such an effort now in the United States to dismantle diversity policies? It is all related. The opposition

has a coherent frame. We, so far, do not—and we are scattered. Without a coherent worldview, without a cohesive frame, we are floundering.

Jacobsen: Riane, I just wanted to say—thank you so much for your time today.

Partnership Studies 2: Human Prehistory

In conversation with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler emphasizes the urgent need for us to focus on values-based systems and the transformative power of caring economics. Drawing on neuroscience and history, she argues that peace begins at home and calls for a shift in worldview to build more equitable, sustainable, and compassionate societies rooted in connection rather than control.

Eisler examines the historical and cultural dynamics of partnership versus domination systems, highlighting how these models influence societies, gender roles, and technological development. Drawing on archaeological evidence, such as Marija Gimbutas's work and DNA studies, she contrasts egalitarian prehistory with later hierarchical civilizations like ancient Athens. Eisler critiques modern structures that perpetuate violence, inequality, and trauma—often beginning in the home. She emphasizes the importance of whole-system thinking and highlights movements that have challenged domination throughout history. The core message is that peace and human flourishing depend on shifting from a culture of domination to one of partnership, starting with the family and education.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy. It is partnership. This is what we are increasingly learning from the study of prehistoric societies: that we need to connect the dots. We must assemble the larger picture. If a narrative is repeated often enough, it becomes more readily accessible to the mind. However, repetition does not distinguish between truth and falsehood. So, what are the myths we have been told about human prehistory—especially regarding relationships and gender roles? Is there a political utility to these myths? Or are they simply the result of mistaken interpretations? I think those are two essential questions.

Riane Eisler: These interpretations are indeed mistaken, but they serve a function: to sustain what I describe as a domination system. Consider the classic "caveman" cartoon: in one hand, the man holds a club—a weapon—and with the other, he drags a woman by the hair.

What message does this cartoon send—especially when shown to children long before their critical faculties have developed? It normalizes a worldview based on fear and violence (the club) and rigid male dominance enforced through violence, coercion, and cultural indoctrination. This is where the myth-making comes into play. It suggests that domination is natural and inevitable—that it has always been this way and always must be. However, the evidence is showing that this is not true.

For example, consider the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük in present-day Turkey, which was inhabited from approximately 7100 BCE to 5700 BCE. Ian Hodder, a prominent Stanford archaeologist who directed excavations there for decades, has emphasized in multiple publications that the community exhibited signs of gender egalitarianism. In particular, grave goods, domestic architecture, and burial treatments do not show significant differentiation between males and females. In his article for *Scientific American*, Hodder argued that being born male or female in Çatalhöyük did not appear to determine social status.

Despite this, recent books and studies often omit these gender-related findings when they finally talk about Çatalhöyük showing that we are actually a basically peaceful species. Why? Because they lack the appropriate interpretive frame—the contrast between domination systems and partnership systems.

Suppose we fail to include childhood, family, and gender in our reconstructions of prehistory. In that case, we are left with an incomplete—indeed, distorted—picture. One might even call it a *neutered* prehistory because it leaves out fundamental aspects of human identity and relationships. Ironically, the caveman cartoon portrays these elements—especially gender relations—quite explicitly. However, modern archaeological narratives often avoid them.

Jacobsen: You are right about that. However, you indeed mentioned gender in the caveman cartoon. And then there are the kinds of biblical mythologies, like Adam and Eve, or popular North American cartoons where Adam has a leaf over his groin and Eve over her breasts. It is very telling.

Eisler: In my book on education, *Tomorrow's Children*, a cartoon illustrates thinking outside the box. More and more people are beginning to do so—but often only in fragments, without applying the broader framework of partnership and domination.

The cartoon I reference depicts Spanish conquistadors emerging from the water. At the same time, a Native American stands on the shore and says, "What do you mean you found us? We found you coming out of the water." That cartoon flips the colonial narrative. Indeed, we are beginning to reinterpret that history. Columbus' actions included the extermination of Indigenous peoples—some of which was deliberate and premeditated. However, part of it also resulted from the spread of contagious diseases to which Native Americans had no immunity.

We are reevaluating the Columbus story, and he is no longer widely regarded as a hero in the same uncritical manner. However, the reinterpretation is happening in bits and pieces, and it has not yet been integrated into a larger framework. That is the key: we need to connect the dots and understand the overarching systems at play.

Jacobsen: Why are the dominant myths about human prehistory such a patchwork rather than being understood systematically—if I hear you correctly?

Eisler: Yes, that is right. We rarely critically examine dioramas in museums, for example. They overwhelmingly depict men—as if women, who give life, did not exist.

Jacobsen: My mother would have something to say about that.

Eisler: What would she say?

Jacobsen: That they are missing the women—and the children.

Eisler: Those gaps are mirrored in our familiar social categories: right and left, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern, capitalist and socialist. What is missing? Women and children—the majority of humanity. There is something fundamentally wrong with that picture.

Jacobsen: You often reference different spectra—capitalist/communist, secular/religious, and so on. Are there some categories that, for you, do not work well as binary opposites or antipodes?

Eisler: There are binaries in nature... There is hot and cold, light and dark—but it is always a matter of degree. So, even in the binary of domination and partnership, we have to consider it as a spectrum. Societies orient along that continuum to varying degrees. Right now, we are experiencing a regression—a marked shift toward the domination system. We see this clearly in the renewed emphasis on rigid gender roles.

These roles leave no room for anything in between, even though people have always existed outside binary norms. How that variance is treated depends on the cultural context. However, returning to prehistory—I think we have not been asking the right questions. Strangely, I began doing so when I was a child. I remember reading in the Bible that "henceforth, woman shall be subordinate to man," and I wondered: What was it like before the henceforth?

Jacobsen: That is a powerful question. You were asking it earlier.

Eisler: Yes—and no one wanted to talk about it. I also wondered why a woman would take advice from a snake. We generally do not do that. [Laughing] But it was not until I began my whole-systems research—which includes both history and prehistory—that I came to see that what came *before* the "henceforth" was a more partnership-oriented model of society. I also learned that the snake was even in historic times still associated with oracular prophecy; think of the Oracle of Delphi: it was a priestess, a "pythoness" working with pythons, with snakes. Think of the figurines from Crete of women, priestesses in an oracular trance with snakes coiled around their arms. So in searching for wisdom, Eve would turn to a snake! We have to connect the dots! And this requires a whole-systems study of our history, including our prehistory and its partnership rather than domination direction.

However, we are not taught history this way. We are taught history through the lens of conquest—winners and losers, wars and battles. Memorizing the dates of all these conflicts becomes the focus.

Jacobsen: Do you see definite ebbs and flows—regionally or even globally—between the domination model and the partnership model? You mentioned that we are currently in a regression, but there was also a long period of progression toward partnership values. What is your perspective on the longer historical arc of this tension?

Eisler: The real tipping point in this tension did not come until around 3000 BCE, and we know this now from genetic studies. During the Indo-European invasions, a dramatic shift occurred in the DNA record—most notably, a near-total replacement of male DNA in certain regions. This indicates violent conquest.

That is when domination took hold. I have written about this, and my work also incorporates technological change. I have an article forthcoming in a new book on achieving peace, edited by my co-author, anthropologist Douglas Fry, of *Nurturing Our Humanity*. In it, I argue that we

must look not only at major technological phases—such as the transition from foraging to farming—but also at overlooked transitions, like the shift from foraging to herding.

This shift is significant because herding cultures developed in increasingly arid regions of the world where climate change has degraded pasturelands. These conditions led to more competitive, often violent, social systems—domination-oriented cultures. Herders, seeking new territory, invaded more settled farming communities. Eventually, some of these herders, such as the Yamnaya, adopted agriculture themselves—but they carried with them the domination model.

Jacobsen: So, climate stress, migration, and technological shifts all helped push societies along the spectrum of domination?

Eisler: We need to see these factors in an integrated way—not just as isolated historical phases, but as interconnected elements that shaped the systems we still live with today. Again, we only know this in bits and pieces. To connect the dots, you need whole-systems analysis.

You can now see the shift very clearly in recent DNA studies. Still, decades ago, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, an expert in Indo-European studies, had already identified it. She described the transformation quite accurately, at least in what she referred to as the Balkans and "Old Europe," where a domination society gradually supplanted a partnership-oriented civilization.

Some argue that force inevitably prevails. Which is actually not true, as we know, nonviolent movements have been very successful, as in India and Gandhi, for example. In any case, the problem with that reasoning is that we now stand at a unique moment in technological development. We have not only communication and transportation technologies that connect us all globally, but also technologies of destruction—biological warfare, nuclear weapons—that could annihilate us all in minutes. And of course, more slowly, climate change, due to the once hallowed conquest or domination of our Mother Earth.

So, domination and force are no longer adaptive, if they ever were, considering all the suffering and trauma they cause. Today they are dangerous—existentially so.

Jacobsen: Are there phases in prehistory—not necessarily tied to specific technologies—where we can track dominator and partnership systems in the same way that genetic evidence now allows us to trace population shifts, like with the Yamnaya?

Eisler: Yes. When the Yamnaya migrated into Europe, a dramatic rupture occurred. The destruction of earlier pottery traditions marked the end of older, more partnership-oriented cultures. There was a regression to cruder, less refined technology and social organization. Over time, the invaders absorbed and co-opted more advanced technologies, but now under male-dominated, hierarchical, violent systems—domination systems.

Now, let me be very clear: This is not about blaming men. There is nothing inherently wrong with men. What is deeply wrong is the domination system, which continues to push us toward an evolutionary dead end.

Men are often the ones forced to give their lives—because someone at the top wants more territory, more power. Look at Putin. However, it is not just a geopolitical issue. Men are also promised a kind of "payoff." In exchange for loyalty to the domination social and economic hierarchy, they are encouraged to dominate women and children—within what the domination model treats as their "castle," the militarized metaphor of the home.

We are seeing that pattern re-emerge in our current regression. There are other inflection points worth noting—points that we often overlook in our current educational and social frameworks. I believe that over the long term, the pen has been far more potent than the sword. Stories shape minds. That brings us right back to the myths.

Take the myths that blame Eve—or Pandora—for all of humanity's suffering. It is absurd, truly. However, we have inherited these narratives. Myths that justify the domination of women, that treat women as property, as sexual objects, or simply as vessels for reproduction. That is what lies beneath many persistent gender stereotypes: the effort to reduce women to things, to tools.

Of course, women have been deeply traumatized by this. However, so have men. Because under dominator systems, men are taught to suppress much of their humanity. They are socialized into a narrow script, one that rewards dominance, aggression, and emotional repression. This is not a sustainable model for any of us.

I remember being in a park years ago and hearing a child wailing—crying—and then a man's voice saying, "I am going to beat you until you stop crying. Boys do not cry." That is the old "masculine" gender stereotype. It illustrates how these roles are enforced, often through violence and emotional repression. However, let us discuss how technology has shaped civilization—how, in some cases, it has fundamentally altered both partnership and domination systems.

Jacobsen: What about the cases where technological advancement caused major civilizational shifts—not just in external structures but also in social relations?

Eisler: Technology itself is values-neutral. What matters is how it is used. Take AI, for example—it all depends on how it is programmed. Yes, we should be concerned about becoming overly dependent on AI. But the real issue is *what* we are programming it for. If AI is programmed for domination, then yes, we should be highly concerned. However, if it is programmed for partnership—and it *can* be—it could be transformative. Unfortunately, most mainstream AI draws heavily from social media data, which reflects societies still shaped by systems of domination.

Again, that is not because people are bad. This is not about blame or shame. It is about recognizing that domination systems are trauma factories. They misallocate resources. In domination-based economies, there is often money for weapons and wars—but rarely for children, caregiving, or community well-being.

Like what we are seeing in the United States now—cutting social programs while military budgets continue to grow. Speaking as a Holocaust survivor, let me be clear: I am not advocating for unilateral disarmament. That would be dangerous in a world where regimes such

as those in Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Russia, China, and North Korea continue to operate within highly domination-oriented frameworks.

But we must recognize how distorted our priorities have become. These are not the priorities of most people. However, people have been so traumatized, so thoroughly conditioned, that they accept them.

Jacobsen: What are some practices from prehistory that reflect partnership versus domination models?

Eisler: A great example is *alloparenting*—a practice observed still today among many foraging societies, where caregiving is shared across the group. It means that the entire community—men, women, and older children—participates in raising the young.

The bond with the biological mother remains essential, of course, but the responsibility and the safety net extend beyond her. That kind of distributed caregiving system is a hallmark of partnership societies.

However, the bond—and the sense of security—comes from being surrounded by caring adults and older individuals. We see a shift from that model in societies like ancient Athens, which we have so often idealized. Athens was a very uneasy mix of partnership and domination. In reality, the vast majority of the population in Athens was disenfranchised. Women, and both male and female slaves, were not allowed to vote. In fact, only men holding property could vote. Beyond that, the male head of household held the legal right to "expose" any infant he did not want to raise—essentially abandoning the child to die. However, the term was a linguistic softening.

"Good women" were confined to the women's quarters and deprived of education. Socrates did highlight some of this, but only in fragments. He never connected these issues to the larger framework of domination that permeated Athenian society.

In my book, *Sacred Pleasure*, I include a chapter titled "*The Reign of the Phallus*," which focuses on ancient Athens. It was not a society where most women had autonomy or education. The exceptions were women viewed as borderline courtesans—such as the *hetairai*—who had access to learning. In ancient Rome, poets like Ovid celebrated romantic partnerships, reflecting the human yearning for connection. However, that longing persisted *despite* domination systems, not because of them.

Domination systems systematically suppress empathy. They narrow our evolved capacity for compassion to the *in-group* only. Those outside the in-group—whether defined by gender, race, class, or tribe—are excluded. Often, the first "out-group" is female humanity.

Jacobsen: We have just about three minutes left. What do you consider the defining distinction between prehistory and recorded history?

Eisler: In essence, prehistory was characterized mainly by partnership-oriented societies. However, as domination systems emerged, we saw both resistance to change and full regressions into rigid domination hierarchies.

Remarkably, it is only in the last 300 years that we see mass movements directly challenging domination systems:

- The so-called "rights of man" contesting the divinely ordained right of kings.
- The abolitionist movement challenged the belief in the superiority of one race over another.
- The feminist movement questioned the supposed divine right of men to rule over women and children in the home.
- And the environmental movement challenges man's conquest and domination over nature.

As I wrote in *The Chalice and the Blade*, these are all examples of a resurgence in partnership. However, today, we stand at a crossroads. The real struggle is not between right and left, or secular and religious, or East and West. Those are distractions.

The fundamental battle is between the partnership model and the domination model. We must recognize this, or we will remain caught in a cycle of emergency response—constantly putting out fires caused by domination systems—without ever addressing the deeper structural causes.

That is why our Summit, *Peace Begins at Home*, emphasizes strategy, not just tactics. Our core principle is that peace starts at home. That is foundational.

However, many prominent figures—even those who speak passionately about war, terrorism, and peace—do not address family violence. That is where the trauma begins.

Jacobsen: Riane, thank you again for your time today. I appreciate it.

Eisler: Yes, we covered much ground today—but that is good.

Partnership Studies 3: Caring Economics and Transforming Dominator Systems

Eisler, in dialogue with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, explores the contrast between domination and partnership systems, advocating a shift toward caring economics rooted in equity, sustainability, and human connection. She critiques both capitalism and socialism for perpetuating domination structures, particularly in devaluing care work and nature. Drawing from neuroscience, history, and policy analysis, Eisler argues that current global crises—from inequality to climate change—require rethinking economic metrics and investing in policies that reward caregiving and cooperation. Emphasizing transformation over revolution, she calls for changing foundational narratives to create a more humane, partnership-oriented future for all generations.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: So we've talked about the Domination Model and the Partnership Model, which you consider antipodes within a comprehensive, holistic framework. We covered the long history of humanity in session two. This session will focus on economics, and it's July 12th today. Within Partnership Studies, when we examine economics, we see that many societies operate within frameworks influenced by various sources, such as the notion of men as "breadwinners" or the "salaryman" in Japan. How does economics play a key role in maintaining—and even imposing—the Domination Model? Conversely, how does a liberatory framework based on the Partnership Model reframe our understanding of economics?

Riane Eisler: There's an ongoing debate about socialism versus capitalism, but if you examine it through the lens of the Partnership–Domination Social Scale, you can see that this binary obscures a deeper issue. What many of us who advocate for a more equitable, sustainable, and peaceful future are confronting is domination economics. Whether it involves an Arab oil monarch, an emperor in imperial China, a European feudal lord, or modern neoliberal regimes—despite their branding—these are all variations of domination-based economic structures. Neoliberalism is neither new, not liberal; it is the domination economics of trickle-down. Trickle-down economics is the theory that benefits provided to the wealthy will "trickle down" to those below through investment and job creation. However, critics argue that in practice, it replicates historical patterns where those at the bottom are expected to subsist on the surplus or waste of those at the top—echoing feudal hierarchies. What we are witnessing today is, in many ways, a global resurgence of domination economics, marked by increasing inequality and the consolidation of wealth and power. Thus, the real divide is not simply capitalism versus socialism, but domination versus partnership.

I recall being invited to the Soviet Union. We were hosted in accommodations that even had a grand piano. I was one of two American delegates participating in a peace event in what was then Leningrad, organized by Nordic women advocating for peace. There was caviar on the table, while many ordinary citizens faced shortages of necessities, standing in long queues for items like soap and food. What existed in the USSR was not an egalitarian economy in practice, despite the official Marxist ideology of socialism. Instead, it was a form of state-controlled economic domination. A privileged elite had access to vacation homes—*dachas*—and luxury goods, while many people lived under strict controls and with limited resources. This dynamic

reflects domination not only over people but also over nature—what we might call extractive or exploitative economics.

Both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, though radically different in ideology, participated in the assumptions of their time. Their economic models largely ignored or devalued caregiving, emotional labour, and ecological sustainability—what some now call a gendered system of hidden values. These systems placed little to no economic value on care work, which women primarily performed without compensation. In many 19th-century legal systems, including in parts of Europe and North America, women had limited legal standing. A husband could sue for the loss of his wife's services if she were injured due to another's negligence, but she could not sue in her own right. This was rooted in the doctrine of coverture, which treated a married woman's legal identity as subsumed under her husband's.

This unpaid domestic labour was labelled "reproductive" rather than "productive," implying it did not contribute directly to the economy—a false dichotomy that persists in many economics curricula today. Neither Smith nor Marx gave serious attention to ecological concerns in their foundational writings. Concepts such as sustainability, environmental justice, and ecological economics emerged much later, in the 20th century, as responses to growing environmental crises. So, to move toward a Partnership Model of economics, we must value care work, sustainability, and equity—areas that traditional economic models have long neglected or suppressed.

Nature, in both Smith's capitalist and Marx's socialist frameworks, was viewed primarily as a resource to be exploited. So, what we have to move toward is what I call a *caring economics of partnership*—an economic system that recognizes the measurable value of caring for people from birth onward, as well as caring for our natural life-support systems. Unfortunately, the way we currently quantify economic activity—using measures like GDP and GNP—excludes much of this. A tree, for example, is not counted as part of GDP until it is cut down and becomes a log—until it is dead. That reflects the omission of the natural economy, the volunteer community economy, and the household economy in our current systems, whether capitalist or socialist.

Jacobsen: What would more experimental attempts to account for those unremunerated parts of human activity—those missing from traditional metrics—look like? How would a more holistic analysis be structured?

Eisler: First of all, we are seeing encouraging trends, even as we also see a regression into domination. There are concurrent movements. For example, we've seen public policies being introduced—and now some dismantled—designed to reward caring. There's currently a debate between proponents of pronatalist policies and those advocating for genuine support for caregiving and children. Right now, the U.S. administration is discussing a \$1,000 incentive for having a child—that is a pronatalist policy. But California, for example, offers paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers. That's a partnership-oriented policy.

These kinds of caring policies were pioneered by Nordic nations, which have consistently moved further—always in degrees—along the partnership-domination continuum toward partnership. And this brings us back to what I call the four cornerstones of either a domination or partnership

system: family and childhood; gender relationships and rigid or fluid gender roles; economic structure, whether domination or partnership-oriented; and story and language. These are foundational. If we want lasting change, we must act strategically, not just tactically.

Putting out social and economic "fires" is a tactic, but domination systems are constantly producing those fires. Without addressing and transforming the cornerstones, including the economic rewards system, we won't change the structure. We must begin to reward the work of caring for people from birth and caring for nature.

Jacobsen: Does this imply some form of redistribution of wealth within the system, but not in the conventional ways we tend to think about it?

Eisler: Well, yes, in short. You would see a redistribution of wealth. And we're starting to see signs of that, even in the United States. For instance, independent caregivers can now earn around \$40 per hour, which is a respectable wage. But it still pales in comparison to the compensation of corporate CEOs. Do you know that today, many CEOs earn about 500 times what their average employees make? It's no longer just 300 times—it's 500.

Jacobsen: I think the general reaction to that tends to be, quote, "It's obscene," or something to that effect.

Eisler: Yeah, but the general reaction does not change the rules of the game. And simply protesting against something—without changing the system and implementing new policies—does not create lasting change. First, it has to begin with a shift in consciousness, a change in worldview. It means not accepting top-down, domination-based economics as inevitable.

Yes, the reaction—"this is obscene"—is valid. But without an alternative system, protest is insufficient. That is why I outline an alternative in my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. I do not claim to have all the answers, but I emphasize that economics is a human construct. We can redesign it. We can change what we reward and even impose disincentives—penalize, if you will—those who hoard or misuse wealth. Look at what's happening with extravagant spending on events like some lavish weddings. Talk about obscene—yes, that's a fitting word.

Jacobsen: What is an argument that this approach is not only beneficial for everyone, but also uniquely beneficial for different social classes in other ways?

Eisler: Absolutely. The current economic system is simply unsustainable. It is fundamentally built on the exploitation of both people and nature, rather than care for either. Anyone with even a basic sense of empathy who is not in complete denial can see that.

Unfortunately, domination systems are trauma factories—and therefore, denial factories. This begins in early childhood, often in families, and continues through socialization into rigid gender roles. Both women and men are forced to suppress vital parts of their humanity.

Meanwhile, the economic system continues to reward only exploitation and profit. Of course, we need markets—but let us be clear: we do not currently have a truly free one.

Jacobsen: Has there ever been a truly free market, as a side question?

Eisler: I believe freer markets have existed, and we can move toward more freedom in markets, but it requires regulation and meaningful enforcement of those regulations. This shift toward a caring economics of partnership is multifaceted.

It begins with a worldview that recognizes the economic value of what domination systems label "feminine"—namely, caring. Rigid gender stereotypes are not “just a women’s issue” as we are taught. How gender roles and relations are structured not only lies behind the subordination of women and girls, it lies behind the devaluation of anything labeled “feminine” in both the capitalist and socialist economics we inherited from more authoritarian and violent times. Indeed, how gender roles and relations are culturally constructed is actually a key principle in how families, economics, and society at large are structured. That is why the four cornerstones—childhood and family, gender, economics, and story and language—are all interconnected. They shape whether a system trends toward domination or partnership.

Jacobsen: Are there forms of human activity that are socially productive but not coded as either feminine or masculine? That is, activities that do not fall clearly into those categories but still contribute to economic or social life? I mean something that does not fall within the conventional categories. It is not viewed as masculine, nor is it associated with feminine, caring labour. It seems like a grey zone—an activity that is productive or useful but not gender-coded.

We know activities coded as masculine are typically considered economically productive, and those coded as feminine—like caregiving—are often unremunerated. But what about a third category that is neither "productive" in the conventional masculine sense nor "caring" in the feminine-coded sense?

Eisler: Can you give me an example of what you have in mind?

Jacobsen: I have no idea. I am asking the expert. That is why I am bringing it up—it just came to mind as a question.

Eisler: We have to look beyond the present, which is still shaped by domination-based definitions of what is "feminine" and "masculine." In truth, caring is a human activity—it is not inherently feminine. In the future, we should not code it that way.

Just look at all the men today who care for children, for babies—activities like diapering, feeding, nurturing—tasks that were once seen as exclusively women's work. In the past, a man doing those things would be told he was not a "real man." And yet today, real men are doing exactly that.

Men are human beings. As we move toward more partnership-oriented societies, many definitions of gender, leadership, and value will evolve and, in fact, already have. For example, the idea of *servant leadership* is gender-neutral and includes care as a core element.

As a servant leader, your role is to empower others. And "empower" is another term aligned with the Partnership Model. In domination systems, power is about control—power over others. But

in partnership systems, power is redefined as power to and power with, not power over. That shift is profound.

I think we have to keep reminding ourselves, as Einstein said—and I will quote him: "You cannot solve problems with the same consciousness that created them."

To quote another icon, Gandhi said something equally profound.

Jacobsen: He was part of the inspiration for me to work on a horse farm and live among people the way he did. He was a sagacious person.

Eisler: He truly was—a sagacious person. And so was his wife, Kasturba, by the way. I am in a film about her. But we do not need to go into that now. You know how it is—women are often behind the "great man." But in their case, they truly had a partnership. Gandhi said something I usually quote: "We make a mistake in confusing the habitual for the natural."

Jacobsen: I like that.

Eisler: Yes. And that is what this work is ultimately about—not just revolution, but transformation. Although in times of regression, revolution may occur.

Jacobsen: In times of crisis, is the Dominator Model more likely to assert itself in shaping a society's vision for itself, or something else?

Eisler: I make a distinction between hierarchies of domination and hierarchies of actualization. There are parents, teachers, managers, and leaders in both partnership and domination-oriented systems. The key question is: What kind of hierarchy is it, and how is power defined and exercised?

This entire conversation today is, in many ways, about that distinction—*power over* versus *power with*. But I also add a third concept: *creative power*.

It is essential to distinguish between creativity and innovation. Domination systems often contain innovation, yes, but much of it is destructive. For example, the use of ovens to kill people during the Holocaust was an innovation—but it was in the service of domination, of "power over," of fear and death. That was a blade innovation.

Today, the regression toward domination is fueled by fear. People are persuaded to identify with those at the top. So when you see extravagant displays of wealth—like the Bezos wedding—it becomes a kind of vicarious thrill for many.

Jacobsen: Is it a bit like a royal wedding? Like the British royal weddings—Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, when they got married.

Eisler: Oh, yes, right. It's like that. But for others, it feels wasteful, excessive, and obscene. And recognizing that takes a change in consciousness.

That's the key: a change in mindset toward awareness and understanding. We need to spread the knowledge that for most of human history, societies were more partnership-oriented than domination-based.

Look at the Nordic nations. Look at the Mbuti in Central Africa. Look at the Mosuo in China. There are many examples of societies that historically operated more in partnership modes.

But often, when indigenous partnership-oriented societies came into contact with domination systems, they were pressured or forced to shift toward domination.

And that's the challenge. We are now at a critical juncture: climate change, pandemics, and nuclear weapons—all global threats. At the same time, we have worldwide transportation and communication technologies. We are globally interconnected.

This means we must move toward a partnership model—one that prioritizes care for people and nature.

We will get there because of the tremendous human instinct for survival. But on the road there, unfortunately, there will be regression—and there will be suffering.

Jacobsen: I interviewed with a British scholar named Alexander Douglas. He comes from a discipline called philosophy of economics, and he approaches it from a critical perspective.

He participated in a multi-part series with me about six or seven years ago. Another colleague of his, Dr. Christina Alice, offers a similar critique: that in standard economics, highly elaborate mathematical models are often created, but these are essentially fantasies.

They give the appearance of precision and complexity, creating the illusion of doing "real science." But when you examine it more closely, it becomes clear that these models rely on mathematical formalism in a rigorously superficial way.

Eisler: Yes, that's exactly right. And frankly, that's what much of science has been about historically. For instance, until roughly 200 years ago, science believed that women had no meaningful role in genetic inheritance—that only men did.

That was considered scientific "truth." Then we discovered it was entirely false.

Jacobsen: The good thing, though, is that when science is done well, it has a built-in corrective mechanism. It catalogues its errors and, over time, improves its understanding.

But let's turn more specifically to economics. How do you see this evolving in the future? You mentioned climate change, bacteriological threats, and nuclear threats, especially climate change. The other two are more unpredictable since immediate human actions, like the detonation of a single bomb, drive them.

Climate change, by contrast, is a slow-moving catastrophe—but there's a hard time limit. It's like we're all inside the oven.

Eisler: Exactly. And there is a time limit on all of it. Think about it: if religious fanatics—people who believe they'll go to heaven and be attended by 12 virgins when they die—possess nuclear weapons, that is not a hypothetical danger. That is an immediate and very real threat.

Because they will use them, we should not fool ourselves into thinking these risks are distant or far-fetched.

What people also often fail to grasp is that fundamentalist religion—across traditions—is not just extreme religion; it is *domination religion*. What people often do not understand is that fundamentalist religion is basically a dominator religion. And yet, at the core of many of our religious scriptures, you also find teachings that could be described as "feminine"—teachings about caring, caregiving, and nonviolence. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But then, over time, those teachings are encroached upon and diluted by dominant ideologies.

You know—"spare the rod, spoil the child," blaming Eve—blaming woman—for all of humanity's ills. And that's why the four cornerstones are so important. We have to examine the stories we are told as truth critically, and we *can* change them.

The transformation from partnership to domination throughout history happened primarily through force. But today, with the existence of nuclear and bacteriological weapons, force is obsolete—it is anti-evolutionary, at least for our species. Cockroaches will probably manage somehow.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] Mariana Trench bugs. To close on this thought, do you have any final reflections?

Eisler: Yes. My final thought is that we are approaching a point of no return. And the faster we can shift people's worldviews—change their mindset—the greater the chance we have. There's still hope, because there are many creative, promising movements taking place.

Look at the environmental movement, the women's movement, the children's rights movement, the racial justice movement, the peace movement, and the economic justice movement. They are all, at their core, challenging the same underlying structure: a tradition of domination.

If people can understand that and begin working through the four cornerstones, we can shift the foundation.

Because unless we address root causes—not just symptoms—the system will lead us to an evolutionary dead end. And that outcome is not necessary.

We can build a partnership-oriented future for ourselves, our children, and generations to come.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time and your expertise. It's always lovely to see you again. I will see you in the next session.

Eisler: Yes—and happy travels.

Partnership Studies 4: Childhood, Partnership Systems, and Overcoming Domination Culture

In this conversation, Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with Riane Eisler about childhood as the foundation of social systems and how early experiences shape societies. Eisler contrasts partnership-oriented cultures with domination systems, emphasizing the impact of family violence, authoritarian child-rearing, and rigid gender stereotypes on broader patterns of authoritarianism, war, and inequality. She highlights historical challenges to domination, from feminism to abolitionism, and points to Nordic nations as modern examples of partnership-oriented societies. Eisler underscores the urgency of shifting from punitive traditions to caring, partnership-based models, arguing that true social transformation begins at home—with the treatment of children.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Once more, we are here with the wonderful Riane Eisler. We will be discussing childhood and children within the context of partnership studies. You talk about childhood as a foundation for social systems. What do you mean by that?

Moreover, how is the treatment of children today in, let us say, societies that have the basics covered—advanced industrial economies—compared to hunter-gatherer societies before the agricultural revolution, roughly ten to twelve thousand years ago?

Riane Eisler: Well, it is good to be with you again. I want to say that we have not been taught to think of childhood and family as part of, and a key part of, the kind of life we have and the kind of society we live in. My research shows what neuroscience confirms: that nothing less than the brains of our children—and therefore of our adults—are shaped by what children observe and experience, particularly in their first five years. This does not mean that we cannot change.

We have very flexible brains. However, as those of us who have gone through some form of psychotherapy know, it can be an arduous process. So, in our summit called *Peace Begins at Home*, we are focusing on childhood—on what children experience and observe. Moreover, of course, most of what children experience and observe takes place within their families. So the summit focuses not only on the widespread violence against children worldwide, but also on how it ripples outward—into social violence, into war, into global conflicts, into the very issues that people who talk about Peace usually highlight. That may include crime, but more often it is war.

And we think that by talking about it, we can change it. However, we cannot, because it is part of the mindset and worldview that children develop early on. The mindset that children form in the context of a domination-oriented culture or subculture normalizes violence. That ties into authoritarianism, too—not just interpersonal violence.

Jacobsen: So when we look at public figures later in life—Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro previously, Viktor Orbán—these kinds of personalities, how would you interpret them within the partnership model of child-rearing and domination systems, in terms of how they were raised? What are the indicators?

Eisler: We know, for example, about Saddam Hussein, Joseph Stalin, and Donald Trump’s childhoods. These were very traumatizing upbringings. Moreover, what they learned about relationships was that there are only two alternatives: you either dominate or you are dominated. Of course, they carried that lesson with them, along with their trauma. If they have any capacity for caring, it is either confined to the in-group or, in some cases, empathy—which is part of humanity’s evolutionary heritage—is severely diminished. We have known this from the work of Alice Miller, for example, who has gone into detail in the biographies of these kinds of men.

However, we need to take a fresh look at this, because according to UNICEF, about two out of three children worldwide—roughly 300 million between the ages of 2 and 4—are subjected to physical punishment or psychological violence by caregivers regularly. That is our legacy from rigid domination systems. We have also seen, especially during the upheavals following the Industrial Revolution over the past three hundred years, movement after movement challenging traditions of domination—whether in politics, economics, or the family. However, we still have not fully connected the dots.

We have not connected the dots between the Enlightenment—the so-called *Rights of Man* movement, which challenged the supposed divinely ordained right of kings to rule their “subjects”—and what followed in the late 1700s. At the end of that century, Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest writers of modern feminism, again challenged another “divinely ordained” right: the right of men to rule over women and children within the castles of their homes.

The abolitionist movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries likewise challenged the idea of a “superior race” ruling over “inferior ones.” Later, the environmental movement questioned the Biblical injunction of human dominion over nature—over “every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Again, that too was framed as divinely ordained.

However, the Bible also contains partnership teachings, often associated with the more nurturing or “feminine” side—teachings of care, of reciprocity, of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. However, these exist alongside domination-justifying narratives, and a portrayal of a deity that is capricious, vengeful, and punitive. That punitive framework echoes in the family, where violence is rationalized under the notion of raising “God-fearing” children. Not all religions or all forms of religious belief do this, but the strands of partnership teaching are often overlaid with domination thinking.

So we need to disentangle all of this. This is urgent, because domination-oriented systems are pushing us toward an evolutionary dead end. Nuclear weapons, climate change—these are challenges that domination systems cannot adequately address. Nor can they cope with the new technologies of communication and transportation that make us all interconnected. We have a massive task before us, and it begins in our homes.

Jacobsen: What methods work at home?

Eisler: Well, as I said before, it is like flying the plane while we are still building it. Many of us have mistaken rebellion—or blaming and shaming our parents and grandparents—for real change. That does not work. What we need is reconstruction.

There are many efforts today to teach children to talk about their feelings, to develop emotional literacy. However, that is very difficult with very young children—before they can even speak, their only outlet is to cry. Still, we are beginning to see an important distinction between *authoritative* parenting, which does set limits that children need for safety, and *authoritarian* parenting, which enforces control through fear and force. For example, a child must be pulled back from running into traffic, but that is different from slapping or spanking as a routine practice.

I do not claim to have all the answers. However, I know that we are in a transitional period where many of us realize that the old methods—slapping, spanking, or worse—only reinforce domination mindsets and normalize violence. We are searching for better ways.

Jacobsen: How does child abuse affect the parent as well?

Eisler: Of course, the parent is also affected by child abuse. You are quite right to call it that. Parents carry with them this normalization of violence, often without even recognizing it. That is why it is essential to reach parents. Moreover, this is precisely what our summit, *Peace Begins at Home*, is all about.

It is a *Center for Partnership Studies* summit with incredible speakers, including two very prominent voices from the men’s movement. This is important because domination systems are deeply tied to rigid gender stereotypes. They equate difference—beginning with the biological difference between male and female forms—with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated, with serving or being served. That becomes a template for racism, for antisemitism, and all the other “-isms.” It is all interconnected.

Jacobsen: What about cross-cultural perspectives? Are there particular countries that are doing well in fostering peaceful psyches as opposed to violent psyches?

Eisler: Yes, there are. Ireland, for example, has very recently demonstrated how quickly a culture can move from a domination-oriented system to a more partnership-oriented one. Not coincidentally, they have also done important work addressing violence in families—both emotional and physical violence. I was invited to Ireland to speak at a conference on exactly that subject.

And then there are the Nordic nations, which, though more gradually, have also moved more toward the partnership side. Again, not coincidentally, these nations consistently rank at the very top of international surveys of life satisfaction and happiness. Finland, Norway, and Sweden are usually in the lead because they implement caring policies. Moreover, what we are talking about here is not only what happens in families but also what happens in the justice system.

They practice restorative rather than purely punitive approaches to justice. They recognize that offenders are human beings—often people who were traumatized or raised in domination-

oriented families. So instead of focusing only on punishment, they address the roots of the problem.

Jacobsen: What about societies where juvenile detention is extensive, or even countries like Iran, where capital punishment still exists for juveniles?

Eisler: Fundamentalist Iran is a society that orients strongly to the domination system, and in such cultures, violence is normalized. By contrast, the Nordic nations were the first to outlaw corporal punishment of children. Sweden pioneered this in 1979, and other countries followed. This was revolutionary at the time because punitive child-rearing was still considered normal almost everywhere else.

What we are talking about, however, is not just laws but a shift in consciousness. This is difficult because we still lack a cultural framework that highlights the difference between partnership and domination systems. So instead, people tend to fall into left versus right, or religious versus secular divides. However, these polarities distract from what truly matters and from what research shows: that cultures—whether partnership- or domination-oriented—rest on four interconnected cornerstones.

The first is childhood and family. The second is gender. Here too, what children observe in their homes is critical. If children see caring consistently devalued—as it often is in domination systems where care is stereotypically coded as “feminine”—they internalize both the normalization of violence and the devaluation of caring. However, if there is one universal human need, it is for a caring connection. Without it, human beings cannot thrive. We know from research on neglected orphans, for example, that without nurturing care, their brains do not fully develop.

It is all there, but in bits and pieces. My research has tried to bring these pieces together using the framework of the partnership–domination social scale.

Jacobsen: Lay out for us two schematics. One: healthy childhood, healthy child. Two: unhealthy childhood, unhealthy child.

Eisler: There is a great deal of research today into how foraging, or gathering-hunting, societies functioned. I deliberately say “gathering-hunting” because the majority of calories came from gathering rather than hunting. Archaeological and anthropological evidence also shows that women hunted, even pregnant women, which is fascinating. We are reclaiming so much of our prehistory through archaeology, mythology, and DNA studies.

What we are finding is that the shift from millennia of cultures oriented more toward partnership to domination-oriented systems occurred only about five to ten thousand years ago—a tiny blip in the span of human cultural evolution. That means change is possible, and we are beginning to understand that change must happen now, as domination systems are driving us toward an evolutionary dead end.

You asked about childhood. Well, in many foraging societies still observed today, there is widespread practice of *alloparenting*—the idea that everyone in the community shares

responsibility for all children, rather than an in-group/out-group mindset typical of domination systems. Children grow up with a strong sense of trust and connection. Darcia Narvaez's work.

I respect her work, though I disagree with her idealization of tribal societies. Not all Indigenous cultures today are partnership-oriented. Some, like the Taliban or fundamentalist Iran, are domination-oriented. Still, Narvaez is right that children raised in cooperative, supportive systems develop healthier senses of self because they learn to trust others.

The question, of course, is how we can achieve this in larger, more complex societies. One way is through parents experimenting with *authoritative* rather than *authoritarian* parenting—providing structure and limits without relying on fear or force. Another is through communal living arrangements that revive aspects of alloparenting. These are experiments in partnership, beginning with family and gender.

Because domination systems are not only about man over woman, but also man over man, in such systems, men themselves live under great pressure: either being subordinate to more powerful men or struggling to stay on top. That constant tension and fear are traumatizing.

This carries into economics. Domination economics devalues care, while partnership economics recognizes its central importance. We need to change our economic systems, as well as our stories and our language. Think of the old myths that blame Eve or Pandora for humanity's suffering. These narratives frame women as the cause of all ills. We have inherited far too much of this.

In most religion, for example, the Christian "Holy Family" depicts only the males as divine, while Mary—the mother of God—is the only mortal. That symbolism reinforces dominant thinking. However, we can choose different stories, different frameworks. That is part of the cultural reconstruction we urgently need.

Jacobsen: What about the wholesale abandonment of large swaths of children in domination-oriented societies?

Eisler: It is part of the system. Children in the "out group" often do not count at all. However, even children in the "in-group" are failing, because traditions of physical and emotional violence create trauma across the board. Many young people sense that something is wrong, but we lack a clear cultural frame for understanding it. Meanwhile, those pushing us backward, into regression toward domination, place great emphasis on gender, on the old stereotypes.

In domination systems, gender stereotypes are rigidly enforced. There is little space for those who do not fit them, even though people who are gay, bisexual, or transgender have existed across cultures and throughout history. Denial of reality is built into domination systems.

This denial starts in families. Think about it: children are entirely dependent for survival—food, shelter, life itself—on the very adults who may hurt them. So they cannot acknowledge the violence; they have to accept what they are told by their elders and "betters." Moreover, much of the time, blame is placed on the out-group, beginning with women. It is a convoluted system, but it is the one we have inherited.

In my book *The Chalice and the Blade*, I focus heavily on prehistory and gender. The book ends with the idea that we stand at a threshold between evolutionary breakdown and evolutionary breakthrough. That book, now in its 57th or 58th U.S. printing and published in about thirty foreign editions, continues to be rediscovered by new generations. In *Sacred Pleasure*, I extended the analysis to focus on childhood and touch—whether nurturing, caring touch, or punitive, violent touch.

The culture is beginning to catch up with this research, but still only in bits and pieces.

Jacobsen: What about neuroatypical children?

Eisler: For a long time, neurodivergent children were treated as if they were not intelligent or, worse, as if they did not exist. Thankfully, that is changing. Psychology today—including strong statements by the American Psychological Association against spanking—recognizes that these children are not “less than” but simply different. This is an important step toward breaking the old pattern of equating difference with inferiority.

That is the heart of the issue. Domination systems equate difference—beginning with the difference between male and female forms—with superiority or inferiority, domination or subordination, serving or being served.

We are not taught to connect the dots, to think in systems terms. Family and gender are often dismissed as “secondary” issues, but in fact, they are foundational. Instead, we are trained to see the world only through conventional categories—left and right, religious and secular, Western and Eastern, capitalist and socialist. Those categories obscure the deeper dynamics of partnership versus domination, which cut across all of them.

Jacobsen: What do you consider the most regressive point in modern history for children?

Eisler: Oh, there have been many. Look, for example, at what happens to girls in some countries where religious customs enforce isolation during menstruation—a perfectly natural event in every woman’s life. They are treated as though they “pollute” men or even other women. That illustrates how domination systems distort natural processes.

However, this is not a matter of women against men or men against women. Caring is a human capacity. In fact, in my second marriage, I was with a very caring man, David Loye, who deserves great credit for pointing out how Darwin’s work has been misused to justify domination systems. He was one of the first to argue that Darwin’s *Descent of Man* was not about ruthless competition but emphasized cooperation and empathy as central to human cultural evolution. Others have since made similar claims, but David was ahead of his time in recognizing this.

So yes, we see regressions toward domination. However, at the same time, we also see many trends toward partnership—though again, mainly in bits and pieces, without a unifying framework.

Jacobsen: Riane, thank you very much again for your time.

Eisler: Thank you. Bye-bye.

Jacobsen: Bye-bye.

Partnership Studies 5: Partnership Education, Human Nature, and Building Caring Societies

In this conversation, Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with Eisler. She critiques the roots of education's domination—fear, hierarchy, and top-down control—and advocates for a partnership-based education that emphasizes equity, multicultural content, environmental awareness, and relational skills. Drawing on neuroscience and history, Eisler emphasizes that “peace begins at home,” advocating for a shift toward caring economics and integrated learning. Her influential works—including *The Chalice and the Blade*, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, and *Tomorrow's Children*—offer a blueprint for fostering compassionate, sustainable societies.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are here once again with the prolific Riane Eisler. We will be discussing education within the partnership model. The partnership studies framework, which you developed, proposes a dualistic contrast between two systems: the domination system, which is based on hierarchy, control, and fear, and the partnership system, which emphasizes mutual respect, equity, and nurturing.

In education, has the United States historically focused more on the partnership model or on the domination model?

Riane Eisler: You know the answer to that—it has been the domination model. The approach has been mainly to cram information into children's heads. That information, to a considerable extent, serves two purposes.

First, it prepares them for the dominant workplace. Second, it maintains the stories and the language of domination.

Jacobsen: When you say that it prepares them for the dominant workforce and conditions them for further domination in educational styles, are you suggesting it is all top-down?

Eisler: The entire system is hierarchical. In *Tomorrow's Children*—my book on applying partnership principles to education—I begin by discussing three elements of the educational process: process, structure, and content. Progressive education has paid considerable attention to process, aiming to make learning more participatory for children.

Some attention has also been given to structure, such as involving children in specific decision-making processes within schools. However, content has been almost entirely ignored by so-called progressive education.

In *Tomorrow's Children*, the focus is very much on content. Why? Because we have been told many stories that are either false, biased, or incomplete. These omissions prevent us from adequately addressing the challenges we face as a species.

We are not well prepared to deal with issues such as climate change, artificial intelligence, and the complexities of the social media landscape. Education must instead emphasize new stories that are, first, gender-balanced—because much of the old curriculum, especially history, has idealized wars and the so-called “great men” who won them. Figures such as Napoleon

Bonaparte come to mind. Students were expected to memorize their names and the dates of their battles.

Including more women is important, but it is not enough to add women into a domination system—those who have managed to succeed and become visible. We must also include values and qualities traditionally labelled as “feminine.” I will address that later.

Of course, partnership education is also environmentally sensitive. And the content must be multicultural. There are encouraging trends moving in this direction.

So we are talking about a truly integrated and integrative approach to education, one that prepares young people for partnership rather than domination.

Jacobsen: What would you say are the important signifiers, in terms of labels and relations, that appear at the pre-secondary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education? In terms of hierarchies, the potential for control and fear that arises from those hierarchies which are more prominent in school systems focused on domination.

Eisler: The fear is always there—the fear of failure. The fear of one’s peers, because they are competing with you, the fear of the administration, of the teacher, of authority figures.

We do not know our history well, but *Tomorrow’s Children* does address it, including the domination aspects of our past, when physical punishment in schools was routine. Fear, therefore, is one of the clearest indicators of dominator education.

Jacobsen: What about systems that produce a particular persona—say, “Mr.” or “Mrs.”—someone who operates entirely on one gear? For example, part of education should probably involve interpersonal skills. Suppose someone is grieving or emotionally activated because something has upset them, and another person responds only with argumentation and a rigid system of facts. In that case, they are not using the right approach. In such situations, care and consolation are probably more appropriate.

Eisler: Precisely. One of the proposals of partnership education is not only to change the traditional content of education—making it more gender-balanced, multicultural, and environmentally sensitive—but also to teach children relational skills.

Children in partnership education would be taught how to care: caring for themselves, caring for others, and caring for our natural environment—our Mother Earth.

It is striking how absent all this is in traditional education. Again, there are some trends toward incorporating more multiculturalism, greater gender balance, and increased environmental consciousness. However, these are often treated as add-ons rather than being fully integrated into the system.

Partnership education is not only about making curricula more gender-balanced, multicultural, and environmentally sensitive, but also about teaching children relational skills—essential for building healthy relationships.

What I propose in *Tomorrow's Children* is an education that tells a different story of human nature and evolution than the one conventionally taught. In fact, the book foreshadows much of what we now recognize as essential: emotional literacy, which you mentioned earlier. It also foreshadows telling a different story of Darwin—what I call “meaningful evolution”—rather than the distorted “dog-eat-dog” story. Of course, dogs do not eat dogs, but that is how evolution has often been misinterpreted.

Jacobsen: Was it Kropotkin who argued that cooperation is a factor in evolution?

Eisler: It was Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). Kropotkin was an anarchist—in the proper sense of the word, meaning self-governance, rather than chaos. He was indeed remarkable. Yes, thinkers like him, who recognized the importance of cooperation, should be included in education—but they are not.

Jacobsen: This may not influence the outcome of research itself. If research is done correctly, the results will be what they are. However, in terms of the questions asked and the research programs funded and emphasized, education appears to play a significant role. Specific perspectives dominate the intellectual and research landscape. Has this affected how human nature is represented in the evidence?

Eisler: Yes. If you ask the so-called “common person” what human nature is, many will respond with the language of sin—original sin—or with the reductionist story of “selfish genes.” Of course, we naturally care more for those who are closest to us. However, consider societies that have progressed further toward the partnership model: they have more caring policies, such as paid parental leave, universal healthcare, and support systems for families.

In these nations, like Finland, Sweden, and Norway, women hold approximately 40 to 50 percent of parliamentary seats, and female heads of state are not uncommon. These societies also invest a greater proportion of their GDP than most others in supporting people through NGOs worldwide—people to whom they are *not* regionally or genetically related.

There is clearly something wrong with the conventional view of human nature as inherently flawed. Sociobiologists popularized the idea that selfishness and aggression are dominant traits, but this view distorts reality. Killing one’s own mother, for example, is extraordinarily rare—the Menendez case is the exception, not the rule. The stories of selfishness and domination have been popularized and institutionalized, shaping education, culture, and policy in ways that obscure the whole reality of our human capacity for care, empathy, and cooperation.

These distorted stories about human nature have been accepted even in science because they maintain a domination system that is ultimately based on fear. It is a fear of those in power—whether a parent, a religious authority, or a political leader. Consider some of the so-called Christian parenting guides, which literally teach that you “spoil the child if you spare the rod.” They claim that even an eighteen-month-old baby must be forced to sit absolutely still in a high chair because what the child must learn is that the parent’s will is law.

If that is not preparation for fitting into a top-down system, I do not know what is. It begins with fearing God, then fearing the authoritarian leader of the state, and, of course, fearing the parent. This indoctrination begins very early. Education, as I point out in *Tomorrow's Children*, begins long before formal schooling.

We have not paid enough attention to what neuroscience tells us. We are bombarded with data, but we often fail to connect the dots. What neuroscience makes clear is that what children observe or experience—especially in their earliest years—literally shapes the architecture of their brains. It influences how we feel, think, act, and even how we vote as adults.

Now, the good news is that we can change. Humans are an extraordinarily flexible species. However, as we know, meaningful change often takes time. Those who have undergone psychoanalysis, for example, will tell you that it requires significant effort and time to reprogram ourselves, if you will. So why not start early?

Fortunately, there has been a trend among pediatricians, early childhood educators, and Montessori practitioners to emphasize the importance of the first years of life. However, this work must continue. Parenting, dating, and numerous aspects of daily life require strong relational skills. These skills are shaped by whether relationships are oriented toward domination or toward partnership. Of course, it is always a matter of degree—where on the continuum a society or family falls.

Dominator societies tend to be very warlike. They devote enormous resources to military budgets—often euphemistically labelled “defence.”

Jacobsen: Where does partnership education emphasize peace? Not necessarily in the sense of advocating war or not, but in cultivating values that make war less appealing.

Eisler: Everywhere, to put it bluntly. Partnership education is not centered on memorizing the dates of wars or the names of the men who won or lost them. Instead, it fosters a more humane approach to learning. It is education for partnership rather than education for domination.

The Center for Partnership Systems is hosting a virtual summit called *'Peace Begins at Home,'* which connects the dots—showing what neuroscience reveals: that it is in our homes where we first learn how to relate, through what we observe and what we experience. Unless we encounter partnership models along the way, we may never realize that partnership is even a possibility.

It is also important to learn about our prehistoric past, thousands of years ago, when societies were oriented more toward partnership than domination—particularly during the early Neolithic, the first agrarian age. However, history has often been taught as if it only consists of the last five to ten thousand years, which marked the violent shift toward domination.

For example, the Yamnaya people—well documented in archaeology and genetics—introduced warfare and practices that were far from peaceful. DNA studies show that when they migrated into Europe, they killed or displaced the local male populations. The Yamnaya genetic markers largely replaced those of the earlier inhabitants, such as in what archaeologist Marija Gimbutas called “Old Europe.”

We have also inherited our languages through this shift in domination. Nearly all European languages are Indo-European. Only a few exceptions remain—such as Basque, spoken in a small region of the Pyrenees between Spain and France, which is not an Indo-European language. It is no coincidence that the Mondragón cooperatives emerged in this region, where matrilineal and matrifocal traditions endured. However, these were not matriarchies.

The difference between matriarchy and patriarchy is only a matter of who controls. The genuine alternative to patriarchy is partnership.

In *Tomorrow's Children*, I emphasize that partnership education also humanizes men. This is just as important as making women visible. It involves transforming rigid gender stereotypes for everyone.

I want to provide you with some examples. For instance, in developing the curriculum—and my book *Tomorrow's Children* includes many lesson plans, most aimed at higher grades but adaptable for younger students—we challenge the conventional distinction between “art,” meaning what hangs in museums, and so-called “crafts,” such as tapestries, rugs, and weaving, is shown to be part of male-dominance. Traditionally, it was primarily women who created these, so it is no coincidence that such forms have been marginalized.

I love some of the art that hangs in museums, but let us face it, much of it idealizes domination. In *Tomorrow's Children*, I include a lesson plan that highlights this distinction and showcases women artists, such as African weavers and pottery makers. These are not “mere crafts”—they are art. So it is also multicultural.

We also discuss concepts such as mass. It is often difficult for children to relate to such abstract ideas, especially children who have not been included in the standard curriculum—indigenous children, for example. However, so-called “indigenous societies” understood mass in profound ways. They constructed monuments aligned with the solstices, so that at specific times of year the sun would shine through with precision. However, we have acted as though Western science is the only form of knowledge on the planet.

In *Tomorrow's Children*, I cite the historian of science David Noble, who wrote *A World Without Women*. Consider this: Western science emerged from a clerical, all-male, misogynist culture, shaped in large part by the rediscovery of ancient Greek texts. However, even Athens was already a mix—an uneasy blend of partnership and domination. It leaned heavily toward male dominance. Remember, the much-praised Athenian democracy excluded all women, all enslaved people (male and female), and all men who did not own property. Aristotle himself argued that women were inferior by nature.

So democracy in Athens was a peculiar adaptation of the concept. Moreover, as historian Robert Flacelière demonstrates in *Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles* [sometimes cited as *The Daily Life of the Greeks*], the head of household had the legal right to decide whether a newborn would live. If a father deemed a child unwanted, the infant could be exposed, left outside to die. Some were “rescued” and enslaved; others perished.

This illustrates how deeply ingrained male power and fear were—not only in public life but also in the household. The Old Testament echoes this as well: Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God’s command is another example of male power, fear, and terror as normalized cultural elements.

As I point out in *Tomorrow’s Children*, and in my best-known book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, the Athenians even made it compulsory for everyone in society to watch plays that inculcated domination as the only viable model for society. However, within these same traditions, playwrights such as Aristophanes wrote of women’s peace movements in Athens. Is that not remarkable? However, we rarely connect such examples with our deeper prehistory.

Tomorrow’s Children was ahead of its time in drawing out these connections—between what we teach, the stories we tell, and the social systems we perpetuate. *Tomorrow’s Children* includes many examples drawn from across the humanities. Too often, when we think of the humanities, we imagine old white men from Western culture. However, that is not the humanities. Humanity is much broader and richer than that.

Some of the United Nations declarations on women and children should be part of our conception of the humanities. We need a way of including all of humanity, not just men, not just women. Domination systems rely on rigid gender stereotypes precisely so that one can be ranked above the other, while pretending that no one exists in between. However, throughout history and prehistory, there have always been people who did not fit neatly into these categories.

There are many such examples. So the goal is not to erase the positive aspects of American history, but to teach both the admirable and the terrible. For instance, we must include slavery and conquest. Christopher Columbus, once venerated, is now increasingly recognized in a more critical light. In *Tomorrow’s Children*, I use many illustrations and cartoons to help children think about these issues. One cartoon I particularly like shows conquistadors arriving on shore and proclaiming, “We discovered you,” while the indigenous people respond, “What do you mean? We discovered you arriving here.” It all depends on your paradigm, your worldview.

This does not mean we ignore the promising developments of the past centuries, especially the last three hundred years. However, we must connect the dots: every progressive social movement has challenged a tradition of domination. Think about it.

The Enlightenment’s “rights of man” movement challenged the notion that kings had a divinely ordained right to rule over their subjects. The women’s movement challenged the divinely ordained right of men to rule over women and children within their homes. The abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, and today’s Black Lives Matter movement have all challenged the notion of a “superior race” ruling over an “inferior” one. The environmental movement challenges humanity’s supposed right to dominate nature.

That is what *Tomorrow’s Children* presents: that children—and humanity—do not have a viable future if the domination system continues to shape our policies and our attitudes. Between nuclear weapons and climate change, domination threatens to bring us to evolutionary collapse. We must shift toward partnership.

Jacobsen: Dominator models often produce bluster—a kind of defence mechanism of saving face when exposed for lying or being wrong. We see this in many prominent cases, including among tech industry leaders. What role does this have in reducing a society’s ability to make course corrections?

Eisler: You know the answer: distraction. Marketing and overconsumption also serve as powerful distractions. Marketing for overconsumption has become a highly effective art form, and it is highly rewarded.

So, really, we are back to the four cornerstones: childhood and family, gender, economics, and story and language. So that children can have a future, we must recognize the barriers.

Gender, of course, is not only a woman’s issue but an organizing principle for families and for economic systems. The so-called “feminine” is consistently devalued. There is always money for weapons, but somehow there is never enough money for feeding and caring for children, for caregiving in general.

Our economic system rewards domination rather than care. And then there is story and language. *Tomorrow’s Children* addresses all of these—indeed, even before I formally articulated the framework of the four cornerstones, the book already grappled with them.

If we do not change education, we will continue to use it as an instrument to maintain domination. Education must instead become an instrument for accelerating the shift toward partnership.

Not an idealized, perfect partnership—but certainly something better than the horrendous inequalities we now see worldwide, as regression toward authoritarianism and domination in all spheres, including the family, childhood, and gender, continues.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Eisler: Then we have more to look forward to. Take care of yourself, my friend.

Partnership Studies 6: Rethinking Power, Relationships, and Society

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Riane Eisler explains her partnership–domination framework, illustrating how deeply internalized domination influences relationships with oneself, family, community, and society. Parenting and education are key sites where values of domination or partnership are transmitted, influencing brain development and shaping cultural norms. Eisler highlights how rigid gender roles sustain domination systems and contrasts destructive "power over" models with partnership's nurturing power. She links these dynamics to international relations, economics, spirituality, and technology, warning that domination systems drive humanity toward an evolutionary dead end. Eisler advocates for partnership values of empathy, care, and equity as essential for global survival.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In partnership studies, how do we define "relationship"—to the self, to others, and to societies at large?

Riane Eisler: I approach this question through the framework of the partnership–domination social scale, because all of us have internalized, to varying degrees, a domination voice. In the United States, this is particularly evident. Parenting today reflects this dynamic: for some, it has shifted toward experimentation with partnership-based models, while for others, it has reverted to domination-based approaches. Neuroscience reveals that what children observe and experience in their earliest years has a significant impact on the architecture of their developing brains. These early experiences shape how individuals think, feel, act, and even how they participate in civic life.

Not everyone is affected in the same way—it depends on the range and quality of experiences available to them. In my book *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships That Will Change Your Life* (2002), I outlined real-life examples of these dynamics. That book has since had its rights returned to me, and I am now revising it with significant updates. Much of its content remains relevant, but neuroscience has advanced considerably since its publication, and my later works have drawn heavily on these new findings.

For instance, my 2019 book *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*, co-authored with anthropologist Douglas P. Fry, expands on these foundations with updated evidence from neuroscience, anthropology, and social science. In revising *The Power of Partnership*, I am adding an eighth relationship: our relationship with technology. This reflects the contemporary reality in which artificial intelligence and other technologies have become central to human life. These technologies can either sustain life—though domination systems often twist them to serve the interests of in-groups at the expense of out-groups—or they can be profoundly destructive, as with nuclear weapons. It is essential to recognize that AI, for example, depends entirely on how it is programmed: for partnership or for domination.

When we consider how relationships are ranked, we must recognize how plural identities and rigid categories are used to create systems of hierarchy and exclusion. In domination systems, fear is often mistaken for respect. This begins in families, where many people internalize voices

that tell them they are not good enough, pushing them to compare themselves to others. These voices consistently speak in terms of gendered stereotypes. Men are assigned one rigid role, women another, with no allowance for those in between—even though people who do not fit neatly into these categories have existed throughout human history. Such rigid stereotypes are essential to domination systems, as rigid gender stereotypes are needed to rank male and "masculine" over female and "feminine."

Jacobsen: You mentioned the internalized domination voice earlier. Many people today are struggling with the question: how can I silence or overcome that voice—whether it comes through gender stereotypes or other pervasive cultural forms?

Eisler: Yes, that domination voice is deeply ingrained. Gender stereotypes, for instance, are omnipresent, and they are tied to the pervasive binary assumption of only two forms in humanity: male and female. We are hosting a summit called '*Peace Begins at Home*,' which addresses these issues, particularly the violence that often begins in households where control and violence are key, and then ripples outward into other social institutions.

Take education as an example. It used to be customary to punish students physically if they "misbehaved" or failed to conform, and in some states, corporal punishment remains legal. Similarly, child marriage has not been outlawed in many U.S. states. These are serious concerns.

It is worth noting that the United States signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child over 30 years ago, yet it remains the only UN member state that has not ratified it. Even Somalia, the penultimate country to ratify, did so over a decade ago. This failure reflects poorly on the United States. That said, not every nation that has signed the Convention fully complies with its requirements; in some cases, the act of signing is viewed as a mere formality.

Jacobsen: So, how do people relate to themselves within domination psychology as opposed to partnership psychology?

Eisler: Historically, Freud emphasized the importance of adapting to the prevailing system. In contrast, today there has been a shift toward what we call emotional literacy: the recognition of our immense human capacities for empathy, for caring for others, and for caring for ourselves.

In my work on education, one of the many failures of our system is that it does not teach about relationships. It does not teach us to care for ourselves, care for others, or care for our natural environment—our Mother Earth. This neglect reflects what domination systems value: in-group versus out-group thinking, conquest, and exploitation.

Domination begins with gender. In domination-based households, children are taught rigid gender stereotypes. They are taught to rank male and "masculine" above female and "feminine," equating difference with superiority and inferiority, with dominating and being dominated, with serving and being served. To the extent that we internalize these messages, all of our relationships—starting with our relationship to ourselves—are colored by them.

That is why, in *The Power of Partnership*, I begin with the relationship to the self, before addressing intimate and family relationships, community, and work relationships. All of these are shaped by whether we lean toward partnership or domination.

Psychology, I would say, has moved significantly toward the partnership side, though not wholly. For example, some still classify LGBTQ people as abnormal, but the American Psychological Association does not. This is a significant step forward. The APA has also taken a strong stand against spanking, recognizing it as violent discipline.

Jacobsen: You have described how domination psychology affects relationships with oneself, one's family, and one's community. How does this extend outward—to nations, international relations, and even spirituality?

Eisler: According to UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF, two-thirds of children globally still live in unsafe households, households where violent discipline is normalized. This reality underscores the importance of the partnership framework. *The Power of Partnership* was honoured as the best self-help book of the year when it was published. However, it goes beyond traditional self-help books by addressing relationships not only with oneself and one's family or our work relations, but also with larger structures such as our nations.

Our relationship with our nation is indeed a *relationship*. In democracies, for instance, we participate in voting. However, today, with the marketing of ideas and the marketing of overconsumption having become an art form, our relationship with our nation is complex. If you live in an authoritarian state, fear is marketed, and fear keeps people in line. However, when societies move toward partnership, people learn that fear and respect are not the same.

This also extends to international relations, where in-group versus out-group thinking is characteristic of domination systems. We see this reflected in cultural narratives, such as the idea of original sin or the notion of "selfish genes." I do not have an issue with genetic studies of nonhuman animals. However, when applied to humans, the selfish gene framework falls short of capturing reality. Take the Nordic nations—Finland, Sweden, and Norway—as examples. They devote a far larger share of their GDP to helping people across the globe, people with whom they have no genetic ties.

Indeed, we are more likely to help those close to us, but this does not mean selfish genes define us. In fact, scientific evidence increasingly points to interconnection.

Consider the Nobel Prize in Physics awarded for work on quantum entanglement, which demonstrates interconnection at the subatomic level. However, the broader public is rarely given a framework that links such findings with anthropological and genetic evidence showing that all humans are interconnected and trace their ancestry back to a common origin in prehistory. Instead, we are bombarded with disconnected data that lacks integration.

From international relations, we move to our relationship with nature, our Mother Earth. Partnership relations foster harmony, while domination systems promote exploitation. Think of the economic theories of Karl Marx and Adam Smith. Both assumed that nature exists to be

exploited. Neither socialist nor capitalist frameworks incorporated a principle of caring for the Earth.

Care—for self, for others, for nature—is not rewarded in our current economic system. Instead, the guiding principle is *caveat emptor*—"let the buyer beware." This mindset reinforces domination structures, widening the gap between those at the top and those at the bottom. At the same time, spiritual discourses often emphasize interconnection, which aligns much more closely with the partnership model.

Jacobsen: You hinted earlier at the role of spirituality and religion. How does this connect to partnership and domination?

Eisler: When it comes to spiritual relations, at the core of most world religions, you do find what I would call the "feminine teachings"—values of caring, of love, of reciprocity, of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

However, these teachings are often overlaid with domination teachings: women are inferior, Eve or Pandora is blamed for humanity's ills, and people of colour are deemed inferior. It becomes a constant in-group versus out-group narrative, reinforced by the idealization of violence. Consider Jehovah, often portrayed as a violent and jealous deity—very much a God of War. Over time, particularly during the Jewish diaspora of the past two millennia, understandings of this deity evolved, Judaism today, especially "reformed" Judaism, is not replete with idealizations of domination. However, the larger point is that caring has been consistently devalued and unrewarded in many religious and cultural traditions.

Jacobsen: Can we make the argument that the type of deity someone believes in reflects the kind of society they value?

Eisler: To some extent, yes. If you believe in a punitive, fear-inducing deity—what people call a "God-fearing" God—you are more likely to support authoritarian social systems. Those systems equate difference with hierarchy: dominating versus being dominated.

Jacobsen: How do fear and force differ from explanation and modelling in shaping behaviour?

Eisler: That is a vital question. Fear and force are profoundly different from explanation and modelling. However, if a child grows up in a household where the so-called "feminine" tasks of caregiving—such as housekeeping, cooking, and caring for others' health and well-being—are treated as inferior, they internalize that hierarchy.

On the other hand, if a child grows up in a household where parents practice partnership parenting, the lessons are very different. When men diaper and feed babies, spend more time caring for children, and are not framed as the ultimate disciplinarians who "lay down the law" when they get home, children learn about partnership instead of domination.

The good news is that in many regions of the world, younger generations are increasingly embracing this partnership model of parenting.

Jacobsen: What about conflict resolution?

Eisler: Conflict resolution is essential, but too often it has not been examined deeply enough. For example, according to the Gottmans' research on relationships, when people resort to eye-rolling, they are entering dangerous territory—moving into contempt. Contempt undermines any attempt at conflict resolution.

Part of the problem is that in domination-oriented cultures, peace itself is devalued as "feminine." A peaceful overture may be dismissed as a sign of weakness. That makes genuine conflict resolution difficult. I do not pretend to have all the answers, but I do know that what is modelled in the home has a powerful influence. Families deal with conflict constantly, but the question is: how is it resolved?

Traditionally, in domination households, it was often the father—though sometimes the mother—who imposed discipline by force. We must remember, this is not about men versus women. Women, too, are conditioned to act as agents of the domination system, both in their parenting and in accepting subordinate roles. The critical issue is whether conflict is resolved through fear and force, or through dialogue, dignity, and care.

In partnership-oriented homes, conflict resolution involves sitting down together, discussing issues, and finding solutions that meet everyone's needs—so long as those needs do not involve harming or annihilating others. Children who see this modeled learn constructive approaches that they carry into adulthood.

Jacobsen: So you are saying the patterns we observe in families echo outward, even geopolitically and professionally?

Eisler: If children grow up with models of conflict resolution that emphasize privacy, dignity, respect, consideration, and care, they internalize those values. However, in domination systems, whether in households or on the world stage, one often sees the opposite: bitter words, smear campaigns, grandiosity, and arrogance. These are consistent through-lines of domination.

The encouraging news is that people can change. I recall the story of a deeply anti-Semitic man who suffered from a debilitating disease. A Jewish rabbi and his wife befriended him. Through their kindness, he eventually converted to Judaism.

Jacobsen: Which branch—Conservative, Orthodox, or Reform?

Eisler: [Laughing] Who knows? I honestly do not. However, it would be interesting to know. Likely not Orthodox, since traditional training in that branch tends to treat outsiders as enemies. Still, the transformation itself is the key point: even those steeped in domination thinking can change when they encounter genuine partnership values modelled in action.

I would imagine that man's conversion was either to Conservative or Reform Judaism, since those branches tend to be more partnership-oriented. The key point is that the rabbi and his wife refused to see him as "the other."

Jacobsen: If you look at autocratic leaders, theocratic leaders, or those who aspire to both, these leaders want power indefinitely. Their systems are static and centralized. However, in a partnership model, power is shared more fluidly. There is negotiation, turn-taking, and adaptation based on the needs of individuals, communities, and society as a whole. What happens when people firmly embedded in domination systems—leaders and their followers—see partnership alternatives?

Eisler: That is the challenge. In authoritarian regimes, people are taught by religion, family, and peers not to deviate. Leaders who want power see only two possibilities: either you dominate or you are dominated. Their followers are taught the same. Anything that looks like seeking peace or compromise is immediately dismissed as weakness—and, as we have said before, often labelled "feminine."

Jacobsen: Then what does partnership governance look like in practice?

Eisler: We are still in the process of figuring that out. One thing we can say for sure is that it is not an authoritarian regime. Interestingly, the European system of coalition building illustrates this more clearly than the American two-party system. In Europe, governments must collaborate to form coalitions, negotiate, and reach compromises. In the United States, by contrast, the system is structured as a win–lose competition, with Democrats or Republicans competing for all-or-nothing victories.

Our culture reflects this "win–lose" mentality everywhere. We even embed it into our language: we speak of "winners" and "losers" not only in the literal sense of outcomes in sports, but as moral judgments about people. "Loser" becomes an epithet, a way of demeaning others. That is a direct reflection of domination values.

Jacobsen: You mentioned earlier the intersection of religion and governance. Some people interpret their religion as justifying the accumulation of wealth and power. How does this connect to domination systems?

Eisler: Many people do interpret their religions that way. For example, some religions teach that material wealth is a sign of divine reward, despite Christianity's teachings to the contrary.

Jacobsen: Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." He also distinguished between religious and political authority with "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

Eisler: Religions often contain contradictory messages that allow them to coexist with authoritarian regimes. One way rulers have resolved this tension historically is by creating state religions. A clear example is Constantine, who converted to Christianity in the fourth century. From that point forward, Christianity transformed from the religion of the persecuted into the religion of the persecutors, integrated into imperial power. (Though historians debate the details—such as the timing of his conversion and certain dark stories associated with him—the fact remains that Christianity became an instrument of empire.)

Jacobsen: How does language play into all this—how does communication shape relationships?

Eisler: Language is one of the deepest carriers of domination systems. Most of the languages we speak today are descended from the Indo-European languages, and they reflect hierarchical and gendered structures. In Romance languages—French, Spanish, Italian—the male plural subsumes the female. If you have a group of men and one woman, the masculine plural is still used.

English is less rigid in this regard, and it has been changing. Words like "mankind" are being increasingly replaced by more inclusive terms, such as "humanity." Singular "they" is also gaining ground. Interestingly, Finnish never developed gendered pronouns in the first place; it uses a single pronoun for all people. That is not a change but an original feature of the language.

Jacobsen: Is there any language we can genuinely call partnership-oriented?

Eisler: Not fully—not that I know of. The weight of cultural inheritance is substantial. Perhaps there are Indigenous or lesser-studied languages that embody partnership more, but I would not claim expertise in those areas. I sometimes think it would be an outstanding doctoral dissertation to use AI to systematically analyze languages, examining what hidden structures persist and how they reinforce domination or support partnership.

What we do know is that language reflects and reinforces internal models of reality. It is our internal representational system externalized. When our languages embed inaccurate or hierarchical models, they perpetuate domination. This is not accidental—it is a fundamental aspect of how domination systems sustain themselves.

Jacobsen: Are there any parts of domination systems that can actually be helpful in relationships?

Eisler: I cannot think of any. What is often confused here is the distinction between domination and necessary forms of hierarchy. People sometimes mistake a completely flat organization for a partnership system. However, true partnership does not mean the absence of structure. Every complex society requires leaders, teachers, managers, and, of course, parents. The real question is how power is understood and exercised.

In my work, I often contrast two symbols: the chalice and the blade. In domination systems, the blade represents power as *power over*—the power to dominate, to take life. Ultimately, that power is backed up by fear of death, whether through starvation, execution, inquisitions, or other forms of violence. However, there is also a different kind of power, symbolized by the chalice. This is the power to give, to nurture, to illuminate life. It is the kind of power we must reclaim, particularly through models such as servant leadership. Much of modern management theory is already moving in this direction: leaders are seen not as controllers or enforcers but as guides and sources of inspiration.

This is the power appropriate to partnership systems. Unfortunately, another problem we face is the widespread conflation of equity with sameness. Partnership systems do not demand sameness; they value difference. That includes the differences between female, male, and those

whose identities fall between or beyond these categories. The rigidity of "masculine" and "feminine" stereotypes is itself a feature of domination systems. Of course, there are standards in partnership systems: human rights and responsibilities standards.

Another point I emphasize is that, at our current level of technological development, domination systems are driving us toward an evolutionary dead end. Technologies of communication and transportation have made us globally interconnected. However, at the same time, technologies of destruction—nuclear weapons and the slower destruction of nature through environmental exploitation—threaten our survival as a species. The domination worldview, rooted in conquest and exploitation, is unable to address these challenges. Only a partnership worldview can.

Consider the example of a religious fanatic, such as Iran's Ayatollah. If he genuinely believes that martyrdom will send him to heaven, attended by virgins who will fulfill his every wish, why would he hesitate to use nuclear weapons? That is the danger of combining domination systems with advanced technologies of destruction. It is precisely why we must move toward partnership quickly, before these systems lead us to catastrophe.

Jacobsen: Thank you, Riane. I will see you next week.

Eisler: Take care of yourself.

Jacobsen: [Laughing] I will try. Goodbye.

Partnership Studies 7: Domination vs Partnership: Rethinking Power

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler argues that many social binaries are gradients, not absolutes, and that domination systems distort them into hierarchies. She outlines four cornerstones for shifting toward partnership—childhood and family, gender, economics, and story/language—held together by the binding force of fear. Partnership reframes power as care and connection, challenges punitive conditioning, and links movements for gender equity, anti-racism, children’s rights, peace, and environmental justice into one unified project. Eisler cites evidence from history, neuroscience, and physics to stress interdependence and empathy. She urges rapid cultural evolution to navigate climate risk and the resurgence of authoritarianism, emphasizing rituals, rights, and relational wealth over control.

Interview conducted October 25, 2025.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We see, in how we think about things, that religions often codify hierarchical and binary patterns—though not all do. Nature itself contains many apparent dualities, such as light and dark or hot and cold. However, these are not absolute opposites; they exist along continuums. Why is this important, and how does it relate to a partnership studies model for understanding the world?

Riane Eisler: Binary oppositions such as hot and cold, night and day, do exist in nature, yet they operate on gradients. Likewise, human social systems have often mistaken natural variation for rigid polarity. Domination systems—those that prioritize hierarchy and control—tend to exaggerate these binaries into stereotypes, such as masculine versus feminine. We should not discard the concept of duality altogether, but we must move beyond rigid categorization.

My research suggests that to achieve the consciousness needed to address our global crises, we must adopt new conceptual frameworks beyond traditional oppositions: right versus left, religious versus secular, Eastern versus Western, Northern versus Southern. These categories have hardened into in-group and out-group identities that justify exclusion and conflict.

Across history, authoritarian regimes—whether religious or secular, left or right—have shared standard features: control through fear, the suppression of diversity, and the marginalization of women and children, who together form the majority of humanity. In societies such as those governed by the Taliban or the clerical establishment in Iran, men and the so-called masculine are still regarded as superior to women and the feminine. This is not intrinsic to religion itself but reflects a domination model of social organization.

As Albert Einstein observed, problems cannot be solved with the same consciousness that created them. To evolve, humanity must move beyond the inherited worldview of domination.

Jacobsen: Are there areas where domination models and partnership models overlap—where they touch?

Eisler: Yes, and we can see this tension vividly in the United States today. The country’s deepest struggle is not right versus left, capitalist versus socialist, or men versus women—these are false dichotomies. They obscure the underlying dynamic between domination and partnership, in

which both the political left and right have, at times, sought power through ranking and control. Viewed through the partnership–domination continuum, today’s global resurgence of authoritarianism represents a backlash against social progress toward partnership.

The women’s movement, the children’s rights movement, the anti-racism movement, the peace movement, the movement for social and economic equity, and the environmental movement are all challenging the same underlying problem—a tradition of domination. If that is the case, then the real conflict beneath all these categories so often tossed about in the media and public discourse is between a return to rigid domination systems—with greater ranking, whether economic, gender, or familial—and the use of violent punishment, versus the rise of partnership models.

Many movements, though still lacking the conceptual frame of partnership—or “partnerism,” if you prefer—are, whatever we call them, parts of a unified movement.

To move forward, we must leave behind traditions of domination. It is one unified movement expressed in different areas of life.

Jacobsen: Do you rank or order the relative impact, scale, or influence of different binaries within the domination–partnership model? As these categories are broken apart, others seem to appear. Are there distinct binaries within these models that emerge as more foundational?

Eisler: I have identified several key cornerstones that are necessary to shift from domination to partnership. Of course, we need short-term tactics to address immediate crises and traumas. For example, poverty itself is a form of trauma. But such efforts alone maintain the system. What we genuinely need is transformative work—work that changes the structure from domination to partnership in four critical areas.

In each of these areas, there is a fifth element, a binding force: fear and coercion. Domination systems are held together by fear and force.

The first cornerstone is childhood and family. That is also the focus of the upcoming Peace Begins at Home Summit, on October 29, 2025, available at peacebeginsathomesummit.org. As the United Nations reports, roughly two-thirds of all children globally live in unsafe homes—homes where violence ranges from spanking to severe abuse. This is where the cycle of denial and normalization of violence begins. It ripples outward into war, social violence, and crime.

When I was in Colombia, for example, the vice president—who had been held hostage by the FARC—told me that every one of his captors had endured a violent childhood. That connection is critical, yet we still have not fully recognized it.

Of course, not everyone who experiences violence as a child becomes violent, thank goodness. But many become punitive, angry, and deeply wounded. These highly traumatized individuals often perpetuate the very systems that harmed them. This dynamic maintains the larger structure of domination.

The next cornerstone is gender. Whether we look at the Taliban, fundamentalist Iran, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union—whether right-wing or left-wing, religious or secular—all of these domination systems place a strong emphasis on controlling gender roles.

Yet gender is rarely analyzed as a central organizing principle of domination. Only a few scholars, such as Claudia von Werlhof and I, have written extensively on how gender has been used to justify hierarchy and violence. Hitler, for example, claimed that feminist ideas were part of a “Jewish conspiracy,” reflecting how gender equality itself was portrayed as subversive.

The larger point is this: yes, there are dichotomies in nature, but they are not adversarial. You do not see hot and cold at war with each other, or night trying to destroy day. You see gradients, relationships, transitions. In healthy systems, opposites coexist in balance rather than conflict. That is the essence of partnership thinking.

Domination and partnership are distinct systems, but there are degrees within them. They do not have to operate, as we are often taught, in terms of in-group versus out-group.

Jacobsen: How can we reach people who are so deeply traumatized that they identify with authority figures—the same kinds of figures who controlled or punished them in childhood? Many grew up in highly punitive and violent households. That must be a significant challenge.

Eisler: It is indeed. But another challenge is helping those already working toward a partnership to recognize their shared purpose. The movements for anti-racism, gender equity, children’s rights, and against antisemitism are all connected. They are each confronting traditions of domination and the false divisions of in-group versus out-group.

So, we face two enormous challenges. The first is to reach those who sincerely want a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable world and to show them that their efforts need not be oppositional. True partnership is not about replacing one dominant group with another—it is about caring.

Care—so often labelled “feminine” and therefore “weak” under domination systems—is in fact central to recognizing human rights. It is also essential to realize that we cannot continue exploiting the Earth. Even our language holds the clues: the phrase “Mother Earth” parallels millennia of dominion over women and dominion over nature. These forms of domination are intertwined.

The second challenge is more difficult but equally vital. Those who seek a better world must begin to view power not as the blade but as the chalice—as something that empowers and connects rather than divides and destroys. The widening inequalities of our time, much like those of the Gilded Age, mirror domination thinking: the concentration of wealth and authority among a few, alongside gender and social hierarchies that separate “haves” from “have-nots,” “men” from “women,” “the colonizer” from the “colonized,” and “in-groups” from “out-groups.”

If we can transform our understanding of power in this way, people will no longer automatically identify with those who wield it coercively. But this requires a profound shift in worldview. For instance, it is inconsistent for some in the anti-racism movement to also express antisemitic or

anti-white sentiment. The problem is not the colour of one's skin—it is the very existence of in-group versus out-group structures. Merely changing who is on top does not change the system itself.

Jacobsen: These domination patterns, according to your historical modelling, have persisted for several thousand years. If these structures are so deeply ingrained, does change have to occur on an intergenerational scale? Especially considering that humanity may have only a few generations left to act if current trends continue.

Eisler: Yes—and that intergenerational work is essential, though secondary in the sense that it depends on a fundamental shift in consciousness first. Without that, structural change cannot endure.

We are at a truly critical point in our cultural evolution—approaching a dead end, frankly. Nuclear weapons pose an immediate existential risk, and climate change, though slower, is steadily producing more and more disasters. We have to act quickly.

The good news is that a shift in consciousness can happen in an instant. It can be as sudden as realizing, “*Yes, I see it now.*” I can speak to this personally. I did not always perceive the possibility of a partnership alternative. I once accepted gender discrimination as simply “the way things are.” Then I discovered overwhelming evidence showing that it has not always been this way. Humanity has changed before, and we can change again.

Jacobsen: Another example might be Germany—one of the most advanced societies of its time—collapsing morally under Nazism and then transforming again into a far more humane and democratic society.

Eisler: Exactly. These transformations demonstrate that cultural systems can and do evolve. Human nature has been misunderstood for millennia. We have been told that humans are inherently selfish and violent, but that is a falsehood that sustains domination systems.

In truth, by the grace of evolution, humans have developed the most advanced capacity for empathy of any species we know. We naturally care for those close to us—our kin, our neighbours—but we can also extend empathy beyond those boundaries once we recognize our interconnection.

Modern science reinforces this view. The Nobel Prize in Physics recently went to two physicists who demonstrated that, at the subatomic level, everything is interconnected—entangled. Physical anthropology shows the same truth: all human beings are biologically related.

What we must learn is to connect the dots between all this evidence. Those who seek to reimpose rigid domination systems try very hard to suppress this understanding. They exclude from public consciousness the very evidence that reveals our interdependence.

This suppression is deeply embedded in traditions of domination—including specific interpretations of religion. Not all religions, but some, emphasize fear and submission, even

framing divinity as something to be “God-fearing.” That fear-based mindset maintains domination rather than dissolving it.

Jacobsen: Do you think the prevalence of binaries in nature, and our tendency to perceive the world through dualities, has actually enabled us to study it systematically? Does the symmetry of opposites play a role in our scientific understanding of the natural world?

Eisler: Nature itself is cooperative, not purely competitive. We are discovering that cooperation is a central principle of evolution. You’ve written about this too—the natural role of love, connection, and sexuality as part of life’s continuity. Nature evolves, and we must evolve with it.

The last five to ten thousand years of domination is a brief detour in evolutionary time compared with the millennia before, when partnership-oriented societies predominated. I wrote about this in my first major book, which emerged from a whole-systems analysis of human civilization, including gender. The evidence suggests that the shift to domination systems was not inevitable.

You can even see echoes of that transition in cultural texts such as *The Odyssey*. The female figures—Circe, Calypso, the Sirens—are all vilified or reduced to temptresses or monsters. Yet Odysseus still needs Penelope, a woman, to affirm his legitimacy as ruler. These are traces of an earlier time when female power and partnership values were integral to society.

Jacobsen: Are those same themes visible in popular culture today? For example, in ordinary television shows like *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, or dramas like *Suits*, where masculinity is often portrayed through conquest, even if off-screen?

Eisler: Of course. That pattern is everywhere. And we must point it out, because there is a profound difference between sex as domination—what I call the eroticization of domination—and sex within a partnership context. In the latter, both partners experience mutual pleasure and respect. Research shows that sexuality is far more fulfilling in partnership-based relationships, where both individuals give and receive pleasure as equals rather than as conqueror and conquered.

So this, too, is a question of worldview. The neuroscientist Dr. Richard Davidson, who works closely with the Dalai Lama, emphasizes that human nature is not inherently evil. Yet the myth of innate human wickedness persists.

We’ve also discussed how the “hero’s journey,” so dominant in cultural storytelling, often glorifies violence. Even when the protagonist is a woman, she is frequently co-opted into the same narrative of domination—winning through force rather than transforming the structure itself.

As we move toward partnership, we are not envisioning a perfect society, but a more humane, satisfying, and sustainable one.

Jacobsen: I spent three weeks in Iceland earlier this year studying the culture, and I can tell you—it’s a society that embodies many partnership principles. Though I must say, even in the summer, it’s cold. Iceland is famously chilly even in July.

Eisler: Exactly. No society is perfect—and Iceland isn't nearly warm enough—but it does show that progress toward partnership is possible, even under challenging conditions.

Iceland is fascinating. Despite their cold, dark climates, the Nordic countries have moved strongly toward partnership-oriented values. What's remarkable is that these societies—despite their harsh geography—cultivate social warmth and equality.

Jacobsen: I noticed that too. After about a week there, I felt a sense of calm—almost a physiological relaxation. The social tone feels cooperative and trusting. There's a book called *Independent People* by Halldór Laxness. Iceland's Nobel laureate in literature, and that same spirit runs through it: a respect for autonomy and accountability. Your victories are your own, your losses too—but you take responsibility for both. People let you live as a whole person. It's an ongoing cultural project, but you can see how those shifts in policy, representation, and values reshape society. Even now, three or four major political parties are led by women—the president, the prime minister, even the head of the major church is a woman, circa 2024.

Eisler: That's very natural for humans—to be partners. It's more natural to seek pleasure and connection than to live in fear and pain. There are, of course, things to fear—disease, death, natural disasters—but we don't need to build entire systems around fear. Ireland seems to be changing along similar lines—and it's also wealthier for it. Ireland has grown more affluent and more open, returning in some ways to pre-Christian cultural roots. They're reclaiming aspects of earlier, nature-based traditions, such as the revival of interest in Brigid.

Brigid—originally a goddess—was later canonized as Saint Brigid by the Catholic Church because the people continued to revere her. She was a deity of poetry, healing, and smithcraft. Her name comes from the old Irish *Bride*, meaning “the exalted one.” She's part of what mythology calls a “triple goddess,” but that so-called mythic golden age wasn't entirely mythical. It reflects an earlier social order rooted in balance and partnership.

Jacobsen: That's quite humanistic, really. Taking what was once treated as supernatural and reinterpreting it as symbolic—turning old myths into stories that teach values, like Santa Claus or *The Three Little Pigs*. It's not about worship but education, meaning-making, and shared narrative. The ceremonial aspects—like humanist weddings and naming ceremonies—fit perfectly within a modern, secular, and compassionate worldview. Ireland and Scotland both seem to be leaning into that.

Eisler: It's a way of reclaiming cultural continuity while shedding the authoritarian framework. It's the transformation of mythology into metaphor—a bridge from domination toward partnership. We need rights, but we also need rituals. Humanity has always created symbolic acts to mark transitions—birth, maturity, death—because we don't really know what happens after we die. We lack the perceptual “equipment” to fully comprehend it. Even secular people need ways to honour change and meaning.

Jacobsen: I feel the same. I never had formal rites of passage. You end up marking the chapters of your life alone, which is more complicated than doing it in community. You mark them through others' life events—your father's death, your grandfather's, your uncle's—but that isn't

the same as having a social ceremony acknowledging your own growth. Norway, for example, has secular coming-of-age ceremonies around age fifteen, organized by the Human-Etisk Forbund. Every culture needs something like that; otherwise, people drift psychologically. Not developmentally—you still mature—but in terms of having coherent chapters of identity.

Eisler: Such rituals recognize biological and emotional thresholds—acknowledging that we’re entering new phases of life. Yet we always carry our childhood within us. Many people suppress their early traumas, but they shape us nonetheless.

Nature has lessons here, too. We still don’t fully understand nature’s complexity, but we can observe its limits and patterns. I often return to the Fibonacci sequence—those spirals and ratios found in shells, sunflowers, and even the proportions of our bodies. There appears to be a kind of design in nature, though I use that word poetically, not theologically. The Fibonacci ratio, approximately 1.618, appears repeatedly—in biological growth patterns, in the branching of trees, in rabbit populations. It suggests an underlying order to natural processes, though its causes remain mathematical rather than mystical.

Jacobsen: I spoke recently with a mathematician friend about that after one of our talks. He noted that since nature doesn’t seem to contain actual infinities, every Fibonacci expression we observe is an approximation, never an actual infinite sequence. The precision we see—down to decimal ratios—is bounded by physical constraints. So what we’re really witnessing are natural approximations of abstract mathematical relationships.

Eisler: That makes sense. Nature expresses patterns, not perfection. They’re not exact, but they reveal coherence. And rather than puzzling endlessly about whether infinity exists or where it “ends,” I prefer to focus on what we can do now—to make life better, to transform how we live together. That’s the real challenge and the real beauty of being human.

The transformation from domination to partnership must happen across all four cornerstones: childhood and family, gender, economics, and story or language. It begins in childhood—violence, denial, in-group thinking, and punitive conditioning all ripple outward from the family system. Gender, too, is central and vastly under-analyzed, except through new methodological frameworks like my study of relational dynamics.

Economics is another pillar: what do we reward as a society? In domination systems, we reward conquest and control. In partnership systems, we must reward care, creativity, and storytelling—forms of relational wealth. These are not separate issues; they are interdependent. As we shift toward partnership, fear and violence diminish.

Jacobsen: Thank you again for your time today, Riane.

Eisler: That’s wonderful. You’re so bright, Scott. It’s a pleasure working with you.

Jacobsen: Thank you, Riane. Take care.

Eisler: Goodbye.

Partnership Studies 8: Moving From Domination to Partnership in Mental Health

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler speaks about replacing Freud's "adjustment" paradigm with a partnership model of mental health. Eisler argues domination systems—patriarchy, rigid hierarchies, punitive norms—distort wellbeing, from families to economies. Neuroscience and experience, she says, show humans are predisposed to empathy and cooperation, though these can be suppressed or confined to in-groups. She links cultural "wars," social media pressures, and the devaluation of care work to distress, and calls for the deconstruction of violent myths alongside the reconstruction of stories, measures, and institutions. The conversation spans the Human Potential Movement, the limits of GDP, and strategies to "wean" societies from normalized violence.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Once more, we're here with Riane Eisler. We're going to be talking today about the framework of the late Sigmund Freud—about people simply adjusting to a more contemporary framing. Although there are statistical variations, generally speaking, the newer ways of looking at mental health refer to a more modern understanding of healing and being healthy in contrast to simply adjustment models like Freud. What does adjusting mean in a Freudian model when you're analyzing this from a whole-systems perspective? How does this compare to a contemporary framing of healing and being healthy?

Riane Eisler: It reflects, of course, a shift from domination to partnership. To adjust is to adapt to what is. Healing and being healthy involve looking at the human potential for something better. That has been quite a shift in how we view mental health. The earlier model of "adjustment" was infused with sexism, which again shows the importance of gender.

It also carried stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Women were supposed to have "penis envy" if they wanted to enter positions monopolized by men in Freud's time. And this was really only about a hundred years ago.

Freud made some enormous contributions. He explored the unconscious, for example—an idea developed by earlier thinkers but popularized and systematized in psychoanalysis—looking at the things we carry from childhood. But his assumptions—and I write about this in *Nurturing Our Humanity*, which, as you know, I co-authored with Douglas P. Fry, a noted anthropologist and peace scholar—were deeply tied to his era. The shift away from Freud's narratives toward recognizing that we have mental health problems we are conscious of represents a substantial change.

This is not to say there haven't been challenges. Social media, for example, has pushed many young people into constant comparison and has negatively affected their mental health. You can see these trends—moving back and forth, back and forth. It's often either domination or partnership.

Jacobsen: How can we talk about these things without taking culture and society into account, as if we existed independently of them? The parenthetical question is: why was that such a big blind spot?

Eisler: We are not used to whole-systems analysis. For example, the trend toward recognizing human potential—the Human Potential Movement—was a cultural movement and part of the broader shift toward a partnership society. These are all interconnected movements, and you cannot fully understand them without examining both cultural and structural shifts, including the environmental movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the peace and anti-war movements.

The anti-racism movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement—they're all movements toward a partnership culture. And then you have the regressions, which are reactions to them. This plays out in the culture. We cannot really separate what's happening—and the lack of understanding of mental health issues in much of the regressive culture—from the broader struggle between partnership and domination models. The domination model, which seeks to return to more rigid hierarchies, is actually causing many of the mental health issues we see today.

Starting in families and extending to economic systems that ignore the three life-sustaining sectors—household, natural, and volunteer work—you really have to look at the whole picture. We're not used to that. Slowly, people are beginning to connect the dots, and that is very important. I hope that these conversations with you can help people truly connect what's happening in families, for example, with the opioid crisis, and what's happening in culture at large. These things don't happen in isolation from the larger culture and subcultures.

There's a culture war going on, though we've stopped talking about it. It's exciting. It's still there. And I think the reason we've stopped talking about it is that it's now clear it's not simply between "right" and "left," as it was framed. The left can be just as wedded to a domination model—they want someone else to be on top.

Take the former Soviet Union, for instance. It operated under a patriarchal, repressive, and often violent regime. Marx's idea of the proletariat taking over turned into a deeply authoritarian structure. It was a leftist regime, but it was regressive and violent nonetheless.

I think we'll hear more about culture wars in the future. I don't like the term "wars" because it implies violence. "War on drugs," "war on poverty," and so on—those are American propaganda frames. Everything becomes a war. It maintains a punitive attitude—one that normalizes violent punishments in families. It prepares us to deny that there's anything wrong with such practices, to deny that they affect our mental health.

What we need, of course, is to view mental health through a neuroscience lens. We just held a summit called *Peace Begins at Home*. One of our speakers, Dr. Richard Davidson, has worked with the Dalai Lama on the science of compassion. His view of human nature aligns closely with findings from neuroscience and with what I write about in *Nurturing Our Humanity*: all things being equal—which they rarely are—humans tend to be kind, caring, and empathetic.

Empathy is part of our evolutionary inheritance, but it can be suppressed or compartmentalized—often reserved for the in-group, especially for males within the in-group. We have a lot to deconstruct and reconstruct to achieve mental health truly.

That's happening now through the re-examination of old stories—religious and mythological alike. Take the story of Eve being blamed for all of humanity's ills; that's absurd. Or *The Odyssey*, which carries clues to an earlier time when women had greater power. Yet even there, the narrative becomes an idealization of the hero's journey—and the hero is a killer.

Jacobsen: Two thoughts come from that. The first is this: the idea of mental health as a holistic concept grounded in science, neuroscience, and developmental psychology is relatively new. That's point one.

Point two is a footnote. In our discussions, we typically reference fascist regimes on the far right or Marxist regimes on the far left—both of which are traditionally patriarchal, domination-oriented systems. My question within that second point is this: have there ever been *centrist* regimes that are domination-oriented? That's the question for point two. And point three—well, I've forgotten point three, but it'll come back to me. So yes, that's the question: have there been centrist domination-based systems?

Eisler: I'm not sure what you mean by *centrist*. If you tell someone between the right and the left—well, who is that? Because both 'right' and 'left' are arbitrary terms describing systems we know to be top-down. A "centrist" in that context is hard to define. I keep hearing about moderates and centrists, but I think those terms are essentially meaningless.

We really have to understand that these are polarities within domination thinking. They don't help us make real change. What you're referring to, I believe, is the new movement—the emerging understanding of human nature that challenges the old stories we've been told. The idea that humans are inherently bad, evil, or ruled by "selfish genes"—that's Hobbesian thinking. Poor Hobbes keeps being dragged out as a model for this mindset, but we forget that, based on his assumptions, his only possible conclusion was absolute top-down control.

If you believe humans are fundamentally selfish and brutish, then of course you need control. But the evidence contradicts that. In natural disasters, like the Blitz in London, people come together to help one another. That's what actually happens. Our true nature is one of care. We empathize; we cooperate.

So the movement toward genuine health—mental and cultural—has to be understood within the broader shift from domination to partnership. Freud's concept of "adjustment" fits squarely within a dominant culture. If you read some of his parables or mythic narratives, you'll see he rejects religious superstition while keeping the same underlying story.

Take his origin story: sons killing the father—the Oedipal complex. It's endlessly repeated, generation after generation. But it's absurd. Whether sons rebel or not depends entirely on what the father does. If the father is a tyrant, then yes, the sons may want to replace him as tyrants

themselves. And that's precisely the story Freud tells us. Freud has to be understood in the context of his time—and it was not a good time.

To put it in a nutshell, the movement has been from seeing mental health as "adjustment" to a domination system—a top-down system, whether that's men over men, men over women, race over race, or religion over religion. It doesn't matter; it's all part of the same domination structure.

Now we're moving away from that toward recognizing that mental health is its own field of understanding—one that can be studied and developed. And what we know from neuroscience today is that human nature is very different from the old notion of people as purely selfish and self-centred.

Yes, we want to survive, but people also recognize our interconnection. That's what's so fascinating—and it's even embedded in many religious scriptures. At their core, most contain some form of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

So we're in a period of sorting things out and, frankly, of awakening. I dislike the term *woke*—it's ungrammatical and often misused—but it *is* a time of awakening. We're realizing that many of the old stories we were told aren't true, and we need new ones. Many creative people are wrestling with that challenge.

Jacobsen: And there's also the personal side. Many people—especially those who have cultivated artistic or intellectual skills—are creating new narratives through painting, film, writing, and other art forms. But I think for many others, those who aren't professional storytellers, there's a similar struggle on the individual level. They're trying to make sense of their own personal stories in a world that's constantly shifting.

Eisler: A significantly shifting world. A world that, as I often say, is interconnected not only by technologies of communication and transportation, but also by technologies of destruction. The domination system isn't adapted to that reality. And, of course, we're also seeing the destruction of our Mother Earth—what we now call climate change. And yes, we are experiencing it. It's the end of November, and it's impossible not to notice.

It's the beginning of November, and we're having a heat wave in Northern California—it's around 28 degrees Celsius. But really, the interview is simple at its core: it's about the shift from domination to partnership.

Jacobsen: Do you think the earlier point about how Freud viewed mental health—or mental illness—as an adjustment to existing social structures reflects a broader cultural framing of the *self* as isolated? Because it seems that a healthy conception of self would be more relational—an extended self-rooted in connection with others, not just an internal equilibrium. When people are cut off from that, such as in solitary confinement, they fall apart.

Eisler: People do fall apart in solitary confinement. That's absolutely true. I think Freud's idea of adjustment meant losing yourself, becoming comfortable with injustice and with the dysfunction caused by domination systems.

And yes, those systems produced immense mental health issues. The women of Freud's time were not "crazy," and they certainly didn't have penis envy. They wanted equity in their relationships.

And the men, who were pressured to be ever more competitive and grasping—constantly climbing the hierarchy—they had their own psychological wounds. But those were *cultural* problems, caused by the same domination system.

Freud, for all his insights into the unconscious and for all he contributed, couldn't see that. He was a product of his time—just as Marx and Adam Smith couldn't see the economic value of caring work: caring for people from birth, or caring for Mother Earth. They called such work "reproductive" instead of "productive."

That, too, is changing. There's an awakening happening. Many economists are finally questioning the adequacy of GDP as a measure of wellbeing.

Jacobsen: Yes, I've seen that emerge in UN discussions and media ecosystems—people beginning to challenge the limits of GDP.

Eisler: But we have to do more than *deconstruct*. We also have to *reconstruct*.

Jacobsen: Yes, that's the more challenging part. Reconstruction is 80 percent of the battle—experimenting with new ways of living and storytelling.

Eisler: Many of these "new stories," as people call them, are experiments in weaning humanity off violence—whether it's cinematic violence or the old Roman-circus kind.

Film is an improvement over blood sport, but not by much, because so much violence still begins at home. And then there's the emotional numbing—the loss of empathy. Too many people have become desensitized to others' suffering. And so, we maintain this ancient institution, we still call *war*.

Jacobsen: Here's a slightly less psychology-oriented question—more criminology across time—but I think it connects to how psychology plays out within this model.

If we compare the Roman circus—public spectacles of violence—to modern societies such as China, the United States, or the European Union as a whole, how do violent crime rates per capita compare? In other words, how violent were Roman times compared to today's societies, which have "celluloid" or mediated forms of violence through film and television?

Eisler: I don't think anyone in ancient Rome systematically measured crime rates the way we do today, but it would be fascinating to find out. Rome was held together primarily through fear and the spectacle of violence. It was a pure domination system—a top-down structure sustained by coercion.

The question for us now is: how do we wean people off the *adrenaline rush* that comes from violent entertainment—the constant portrayal of conflict and dominance on screen?

And related to that, how do we begin to challenge the *eroticization* of violence—the way sexuality is often intertwined with domination? That's where I would start when unpacking the broader issue of pornography and power dynamics. Someone is always the dominator; even in something as symbolic as the missionary position, it reflects a "man-on-top" worldview.

It requires a holistic approach, but people *are* beginning to connect the dots—slowly, but surely. That gives me hope on the deconstruction side. The reconstruction side, however, is harder.

Many people are traumatized—some still consciously or unconsciously identify with those on top, those who dominate. Others remain in denial, still believing that male dominance or hierarchical control is divinely ordained—that kings, presidents, dictators, whoever happens to be "on top," are there by cosmic right.

How do we reach them? That's the challenge. But I think there's a large group of people in the middle who, through the lens of the partnership–domination framework, can begin to wake up and say, "I see now that this isn't healthy. This doesn't support mental, physical, or societal wellbeing."

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 9: Peace, Violence, and the Domination–Partnership Model

In this dialogue, Scott Douglas Jacobsen interviews Eisler on peace, violence, and the domination–partnership social model. Eisler argues that large-scale war is not inevitable but a symptom of domination systems that reward violence and hierarchy. Partnership systems, by contrast, prioritize caring, equality, and sustainable relations with self, others, and the Earth. She stresses the importance of early childhood experiences, gender equality, economic valuation of care work, and cultural narratives in shaping societies. In an era of nuclear weapons and climate crisis, Eisler insists that moving toward partnership is not just moral but essential for survival.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We are here for a partnership study series with Riane Eisler, a scholar who developed the domination–partnership social model and founded the Center for Partnership Systems. Thank you for joining me again. A big question: What is peace? What is violence? You've often said nature presents dichotomies as opposites. Should we define peace and violence as opposites? And if so, should they be described in relation to each other?

Riane Eisler: We commonly think of peace as merely an interval between wars—as if war were inevitable. Yet archaeological and historical evidence shows that while interpersonal violence is ancient, the scale and organization of warfare increased markedly with settled agriculture, social stratification, and the rise of states. In other words, large-scale, organized war is not a timeless human constant; it intensified under particular social conditions.

Treating war as "inevitable" serves systems that maintain control through force. Organized violence has long been used to dominate other nations and groups—and even to control one's own population. So there is a distinction, but also a connection, between social systems that normalize the use of violence, fear, and pain and the persistence of war over peace.

Jacobsen: Over several millennia, you describe an ebb and flow between domination and partnership systems. You've suggested two broad phases of violence: pre-industrial and post-industrial, with mechanization making wars more deadly. Is that a useful distinction, or is war simply war?

Eisler: It's useful. War as an instrument of control through force is a symptom of domination systems. When societies reward such behaviour, technological advances—from metallurgy to industrial manufacturing to digital targeting—tend to amplify harm. If incentives were aligned with partnership values, we would invest more in nonviolent conflict resolution rather than in escalating the capacity to inflict suffering.

Jacobsen: What about subterfuge, coercion, and torture as elements of war?

Eisler: They're part of the same control toolkit. And now, in a nuclear, post-industrial era—under climate stress and with weapons capable of mass destruction—we have to view war through a survival lens. The risk is not only state-to-state conflict but also catastrophic decisions by actors driven by absolutist ideologies, sometimes couched in religious terms. Humanity now wields

destructive power once imagined as belonging only to a "father-god," which makes cultivating partnership systems not just preferable, but necessary.

In most world religions, ultimate power was once attributed to the divine—the power of destruction. Humanity now holds that power. This means we have to ask what is truly adaptable from a realistic perspective. In the age of nuclear weapons, climate change, and global crises, war is not flexible.

Jacobsen: Then peace is not just the absence of war. In partnership studies, what do we mean by peace in a more technical sense?

Eisler: At the Center for Partnership Systems, including in our "Peace Begins at Home" summit, we emphasize that peace is not just the absence of war. Peace is a way of relating—relating to ourselves, to others, and to our Mother Earth. "Others" includes family members, neighbours, communities, and other nations.

We must create institutions that help us move away from domination. People raised in domination systems believe there are only two options: you either dominate or you are dominated. Naturally, this mindset justifies the use of force. But in an age of nuclear weapons, that logic is ultimately self-destructive. We have to find another way of relating.

Neuroscience confirms that early family relations shape lifelong patterns. This is why peace-building must begin at home. Violence and authoritarianism are deeply connected, and if we want to change the roots of violence, we must change how children experience care and authority in their earliest years. This is what we highlight in the "Peace Begins at Home" summit: there is a third alternative, which we call partnership. Partnership requires developing institutions and behaviours that help us address our existential crises.

Even in nations such as the United States, which is experiencing a regression toward domination, partnership elements remain. Many organizations are working for peace and demonstrating that alternatives exist.

Jacobsen: We often talk about binaries in nature. I see two aspects to that. If we use a correspondence theory of truth, some binaries—like hot and cold—are sensory and physical. Others are conceptual and socially constructed, especially in human relations. For example, if you look at the Earth and the moon, the binary of East and West does not exist in any physical sense; it is a human construct.

In human affairs, we often talk about "East" and "West" as dichotomies, but in practice, people are far more similar than those categories suggest. These global binaries exist in some cultural or geopolitical metrics, but when it comes to individuals, the differences are often overstated.

There's not much difference between people across supposed cultural divides. So, when we look at the evidence presented at the summit, where do these false dichotomies come from? How do they become the basis for seeing others as "the other," with a negative valence?

Eisler: What you're pointing to is really an issue of consciousness, of worldview. If you have a partnership worldview, you recognize that we are interconnected. Nations that lean more toward partnership—such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway—invest more of their foreign aid in people on the other side of the globe, people to whom they are not genetically related. This reflects a recognition of some of the core principles present in many world religions—what I call the more "feminine" teachings of interconnection, caring, and love.

The problem is that we are not systematically taught caring in our education. We should be learning to care for ourselves, for others, and for our Mother Earth. But in domination systems, the aim of schooling often becomes instilling the belief that you either dominate or you are dominated.

Domination systems are self-perpetuating. They benefit from maintaining dichotomies: "We, the East, are not like the self-indulgent West," or "We, the West, are not like the backward East." In-group versus out-group thinking is fundamental to domination systems.

One of the significant issues I focus on in my whole-systems research is gender. There are two basic biological forms in humanity—male and female. In regressive periods, such as what we see in Afghanistan under the Taliban or in fundamentalist Iran, domination systems reinforce rigid gender stereotypes. They insist on strict rankings of male over female, denying the existence of anything in between. Such rigidity is necessary for maintaining domination.

This trains people to equate difference—starting with male versus female forms, and what is defined as "masculine" or "feminine"—with hierarchy: superior versus inferior, dominating versus dominated. And it is a template for ranking rather than linking, be it of races, religions, nations, etc. That is falsely presented as "natural" or "normal."

We must therefore look at the roots of the problem, which take us directly to gender. Neuroscience also reveals that the first five years of life are crucial. A child's brain is still forming, and what they experience or observe in those years shapes not only how they think and feel, but also how they act later in life—even how they vote. This is why I consider two cornerstones essential: changing the way we raise children and changing the way we think about gender.

Both domination and partnership systems take us to the root causes. If a child observes in their family that so-called "women's work" is considered less valuable, then we see how rigid gender stereotypes are reinforced. This connects directly to a third cornerstone: economics.

Caring isn't valued. Historically, both Karl Marx and Adam Smith—reflecting the norms of their times—treated care work, starting from birth, as unpaid labour performed by women in male-controlled households. We must look at this history carefully, and also at the role of story and language in shaping our values.

I don't have all the answers, but I know we cannot find them unless we recognize partnership as a viable alternative—how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to our Mother Earth.

Jacobsen: On the topic of stories and violence, religions contain caring and nurturing teachings. Yet many also emphasize war and histories of combat. Some of these battles may or may not have occurred historically, but they're often given divine sanction and mythologized. We find narratives where entire peoples are ordered to be slaughtered, for example.

Eisler: Yes, you've touched on a crucial issue. Progressive religious leaders who want a more peaceful, equitable, and sustainable world must examine scriptures with discernment. They need to separate the "grain"—the core teachings of caring and reciprocity, such as the Golden Rule, which are present in all traditions—from the domination overlay: teachings that rank women as inferior or blame them for humanity's ills.

And this isn't limited to the major Abrahamic religions. In Zoroastrianism, for example, feminine figures are sometimes blamed for chaos. In Buddhism, very few holy figures are women, and historically, women have faced significant barriers to entering monasteries or rising to positions of authority.

You may recall that the Dalai Lama once joked—though I'd suggest partly in earnest—that if he were reborn, he hoped it would be as a woman, even a Western woman. He has also said that the fate of Tibet was tied to the treatment of women, suggesting a kind of karmic connection.

What matters here is urging religious leaders to sort the grain from the chaff. The vengeful, capricious deity imagery often serves to reinforce domination systems on Earth. Traditional religions frequently emphasize the time before we are born and after we die. Life in between is framed as a "veil of tears," justified by ideas such as original sin. Even in secular science, narratives like "selfish genes" reinforce a worldview where cooperation is minimized and only in-group solidarity is seen as natural.

That's not true. People do help those outside their group. Look at Doctors Without Borders, for example. They provide care to people with whom they share no genetic ties. However, they're a relatively small group. And even they sometimes fall into out-group blame and shame.

Blame and shame are integral to the arsenal of domination systems. In childhood, they force us to deny reality—because we cannot admit that the very people we depend on for life, shelter, food, and care are also causing us pain. That denial becomes a pattern. As adults, we become more susceptible to climate change denial, COVID denial, election result denial—denial in many forms.

This is why we must pay close attention to the four cornerstones: childhood and family relations, gender norms, economic values, and stories and language. Gender in particular is central because it teaches us to equate difference with superiority or inferiority. That logic extends outward to race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. The goal is not perfection but moving societies toward the partnership side of the domination–partnership social scale. And that movement is now a matter of survival at our stage of technological development.

Domination systems rely on war and violence, and they reduce people to utilities. Women are valued for their reproductive capacity—hence, current calls from some wealthy elites for higher

birth rates. Men, meanwhile, are sent to war, often drafted to die at a young age. Men don't fare well in domination systems either, but they're given a "substitute reward": the sense of being "king of the castle" at home, with authority over women and children.

Unfortunately, we are not taught to connect the dots. What passes for systems thinking often ignores the majority of humanity—women and children. That is not true systems thinking.

Jacobsen: Why is mental compartmentalization key to understanding domination systems?

Eisler: Because one of the things we're taught in domination systems is to compartmentalize. Take empathy. Empathy evolved gradually. In reptiles, offspring receive little to no care. But with mammals and birds, care of the young became essential for survival. Empathy is part of our evolutionary heritage. Yet domination systems compartmentalize it. They restrict empathy to the in-group, and even then, not to all members—for example, women may be considered inferior even within the in-group.

This isn't about women against men or men against women. Caring is a human capacity. But we've been taught to equate caring with the "feminine." That not only devalues care itself but also deprives men of part of their humanity. Men feel emotions too, and partnership systems encourage them to acknowledge and embrace those emotions instead of suppressing them. Men are allowed to express contempt and anger, but they're discouraged from expressing softer, more caring emotions.

Jacobsen: Let's expand this. Modern technologies have changed the discourse. People carry a war mentality online. Anonymity across borders enables them to attack one another, build echo chambers, form coalitions, and emotionally abuse people they don't even know. It becomes an abstracted in-group/out-group dynamic—hatred directed toward strangers halfway across the world.

Eisler: To address this, we must examine the problem systematically. What is instilled in children when they are young? If we teach them to equate caring with the feminine, and the feminine with weakness, then we limit their sense of what is humanly possible. It becomes a question of consciousness—how we see ourselves and others—and that question is now existential.

Jacobsen: On health metrics, domination-oriented societies seem to live shorter lives, don't they?

Eisler: The picture is more complicated. In some domination-oriented countries, life expectancies have increased thanks to advances in medical science—vaccines, for example, have saved millions of lives. Yet at the same time, we see resistance to science, such as vaccine denial in the United States.

In societies locked in domination, war casualties are also devastating. Take Russia today: its war has produced tremendous casualties, with men especially paying the price. Domination systems often show little regard for the value of human life.

So it's not a simple question, but I always return to the importance of a shift in consciousness. Peace begins at home. It starts in early childhood and family life. It also requires re-examining our religious beliefs. Sorting the grain from the chaff in scripture is a vital project—lifting the teachings of care while rejecting domination overlays. But this work carries risks. Religious fanatics, who insist every word of scripture is divine and unquestionable, can respond with violence.

Jacobsen: Why is the partnership model not prevailing right now, when it would clearly help reduce violence and war?

Eisler: That's an important question. The partnership model is not absent. It is gaining ground among specific segments of the population—even in countries like the United States, where there's a significant regression toward domination. Look at the global women's movement, the children's rights movement, the anti-racism movement, the peace movement, and the economic justice movement. These are all manifestations of partnership values. But they are countered by enormous and often violent domination backlash.

Eisler: The very notion of "winning" or "losing" comes from domination systems. Partnership calls for a win-win framework, where everyone's basic needs can be met. That's only possible if we give up the idea that one type of person must always be on top and another underneath.

Jacobsen: How can large, complex societies make care and dignity non-optional? So, in other words, you're talking about embedding change into institutions—making care and dignity non-optional.

Eisler: That means shifting the four cornerstones from domination to partnership. And it really has to be all four. If we reward caring—if we find ways to value it economically—then we will see much more of it. If we model partnership in families, between the two basic forms of humanity, and stop devaluing so-called "women's work" of caring, then society as a whole will come to value it. It's a question of values. What do we reward in families, in economics, in our culture, in our stories and language? That is what shapes the future.

Jacobsen: The end. All right, Riane, I'll see you next week. Thank you.

Eisler: Thank you. Take care of yourself.

Partnership Studies 10: Language, Parenting, Mythos

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler argues that domination persists through rigid gender roles, early socialization, skewed economics, and mythic narratives. Her partnership model centers four cornerstones—childhood and family, gender, economics, and story/language—shaping minds, policies, and culture. She critiques religious and secular dogmas while noting that faith and science can support partnership. Eisler emphasizes caring economics, hierarchies of actualization, and empathy that extends beyond in-groups. Examples include Nordic policies, Ireland's shift, archaeological evidence of egalitarian prehistory, and linguistic change. She warns that domination is maladaptive in the face of nuclear and climate risks, urging systemic reform. The Peace Begins at Home Summit highlights early caregiving as a vital infrastructure and encourages collaboration toward partnership.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Once again, we are here with the prolific and internationally distinguished Riane Eisler, founder of Partnership Studies. This is part eight of our series. Today, the focus, based on our preset plan from several weeks ago, is gender, childhood stories, and language within partnerships. This promises to be a fascinating discussion because, as you have often noted, domination models in many societies neglect more than half of the world's population—women and children, both boys and girls. How do you connect the social construction of gender roles to the persistence of domination systems, not just as a model but as systems embedded in society?

Riane Eisler: We have been conditioned to think of gender as simply a woman's issue. Later, it was also framed as a men's issue. In reality, gender encompasses everyone, including people who do not fit neatly into binary categories—gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other identities—which have always existed, despite being marginalized.

Gender roles are not peripheral matters; they are central to how families, economies, education, and societies are organized. Those pushing for a return to rigid domination systems—more authoritarian, male-dominated orders, with extreme inequality between haves and have-nots—place heavy emphasis on gender.

Why? Domination systems are built on rigid stereotypes of "masculine" and "feminine," leaving no legitimate space for anything in between. So in the United States today, we see ongoing attempts to impose policies that legally recognize only two sexes. These efforts are tied to reinforcing male dominance and rigid gender roles. Ranking men and masculinity over women, girls, and femininity is only possible if rigid stereotypes are first enforced; otherwise, there is no clear basis for hierarchy.

This plays out in economic policy. There is consistent funding for stereotypically "masculine" priorities—war, domination, and violence—yet insufficient support for stereotypically "feminine" responsibilities such as childcare, education, and caregiving. Moreover, because there is now a growing movement toward caring policies, emphasizing investment in families and social well-being, those who cling to domination models perceive this as a direct threat. That has triggered the backlash we are witnessing today.

These traits are considered "feminine," so domination systems insist on reinstating rigid gender stereotypes. By ranking male and "masculinity" over female and "femininity" difference itself is equated with superiority and inferiority, dominating or being dominated, serving or being served.

That logic extends to all forms of difference, so we have racism, antisemitism, indeed, all in-group versus out-group thinking and behaviour.

Jacobsen: We internalize these patterns early, through parental modelling and, in a way, through mentoring. How does this shape childhood experience? Moreover, how do those childhood experiences then shape society when these children grow into adults?

Eisler: Findings from neuroscience are obvious. What children observe or experience—especially in the first five years, which occurs mainly in families—has a profound impact. If children see that what women and girls are and do is devalued in domination systems—caring, caregiving, nonviolence, and so forth—they absorb that. Girls are socialized for it, but this is not an issue of women against men. It is a human issue. Many women support domination because it is deeply ingrained in their brains.

If children see this devaluation, they internalize it. It shapes how they think, feel, act—including how they vote, when they have the opportunity.

Why do human beings often defend their chains? I mean the unseen chains of tradition and hierarchy. People defend them, polish them, even protect them. That is what we must understand and overcome.

The answer lies in what I call the four cornerstones that underlie both domination-oriented and partnership-oriented systems—always a matter of degree. First is childhood and family. In our conventional categories, where do children and families appear? Nowhere. Second is gender: how gender roles and relations are structured. That is fundamental. Moreover, in fundamentalist religious frameworks, gender inequality is justified as "God's will," where women are told they must be men's helpers and subordinate.

The third cornerstone is economics. Both socialism and capitalism, as I discuss in my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, perpetuate gendered systems of value. There is always money for the "masculine"—control, violence, weaponry—but somehow not enough for the "feminine" work of care – or for caring for our Mother Earth.

The fourth cornerstone is story and language. All four—childhood, gender, economics, and story/language—are interconnected, and they profoundly shape how we think, feel, and act. In domination systems, they all reinforce in-group versus out-group domination.

Superiority, inferiority, and related hierarchies bring me to what I would like to leave as my legacy. Yes, we must put out the immediate fires, but domination systems are trauma factories—there will always be new fires as long as the system persists. At the same time, we must address the four cornerstones, whichever speaks to us most directly.

There is the women's movement, the children's rights movement, the anti-racism movement—each is part of the same larger shift toward partnership, challenging traditions of domination. The backlash we see today is a reaction to these partnership-oriented movements, which have accelerated over the past three centuries, especially as the Industrial Revolution disrupted old patterns. What once seemed immutable no longer was.

During this period, movements for economic justice, peace, abolition of slavery, women's rights, and, more recently, children's rights gained momentum. The environmental movement also arose, challenging the dominant tradition that claimed humans—particularly men—were divinely ordained to dominate the earth and everything that lives on it.

Jacobsen: That tradition, again, is supported by stories and myths. What about those?

Eisler: We all live in stories, whether we realize it or not. Take, for example, the stories told about human nature: original sin or selfish genes. Different language, same message—we are bad and must be rigidly controlled from above, whether by a fearful God or by rigid social hierarchies. Domination systems inculcate fear. Of course, there are natural fears—illness, death, earthquakes—but domination systems focus on instilling human-created fear: the fear of punishment, the fear of authority, the fear of stepping outside rigid rankings.

Jacobsen: There is a hidden premise here worth clarifying. What about secular dogmas—often political ideologies—that function as dogmas in much the same way as religious or divinely ordained hierarchies? Do they play a similar role in imposing domination?

Eisler: First, it is important to emphasize that faith itself is not the problem. Many people hold faith in transcendent realities and do not subscribe to domination systems. To target faith as the root issue is too simplistic. Remember, science itself, until well into the nineteenth century, upheld domination myths; for example, the scientific consensus of the time claimed women contributed nothing biologically to reproduction, they were just containers.

For centuries, scientific dogma held that men alone passed on their genes. Women were thought to be merely containers. Historian David Noble, in his book *A World Without Women*, describes how modern science began in a monastic, clerical, celibate, and deeply misogynist context. Moreover, I would add—it was not only a world without women. It was also a world without children.

It was a world rooted in domination: the "God-fearing" model replicated in hierarchical religions, where authority is enforced through obedience. So it is not faith in itself, nor science in itself. The real struggle is between partnership and domination. We see this conflict across movements challenging traditions of domination and against the backlash that seeks regression.

Think about it: in domination systems, authoritarian families and authoritarian states mirror each other. Gender ranking is central. Violence and abuse are built into the structure, reinforced by story and language. These are stories rooted in fear of punishment. Look at our fairy tales: only a prince can save Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty. Such tales teach gender roles, but also something subtler—that only those on top can save us, usually from the very dangers they embody.

We must change our worldview. The traditions of domination need to be left behind. We must distinguish between hierarchies of domination and hierarchies of actualization. Every society needs parents, teachers, managers, and leaders, but power can be understood in different ways. Not "power over," but "power with" and "power to"—including our creative power.

Archaeology increasingly shows evidence of prehistoric societies oriented toward partnership: more gender-balanced, more equitable, more peaceful. For example, Chinese archaeologists recently excavated a matrilineal society that was more egalitarian. Reports even appeared in mainstream outlets like *The Wall Street Journal*. However, we receive these findings only in fragments, and without the frame of partnership versus domination, the larger pattern remains invisible. Without that shift in framing, we will continue fighting for scraps falling from the tables of those at the top.

What we need is a change in what we institutionally value.

Jacobsen: What about the metaphors of war and conquest? Domination systems seem to glorify them, whether through heroic tales of warriors or through demonizing villains.

Eisler: It is always simplified into "good versus evil," resolved through violence. Even our judicial system carries traces of this; trial by combat has only been replaced with a ritualized version in court. As an attorney, I can attest to that.

The whole judicial system is set up to be adversarial. Before I left the law, I practiced family law. If someone had set out to invent the worst possible system for dissolving or restructuring a family—especially one with children—it would be this adversarial approach.

I introduced fair prenuptial agreements and mediation as alternatives, but this was in the 1970s. Much has changed since then, including my decision to leave that profession. Still, my legal training was helpful because it gave me a systematic way of thinking. Clients do not come into your office and ask you to apply section 1222 of the penal code; they tell you a story, and your job is to translate that story into applicable law. That is systems thinking.

Earlier, right out of college, I worked for an offshoot of the RAND Corporation. There, I learned about systems thinking from the start. That perspective has shaped my research. It considers all of humanity—both its female and male halves, and everyone in between. It encompasses the intimate relationships within families, as well as political relationships. It connects the dots, and it includes all of history, even prehistory.

The shift to domination happened very recently in evolutionary terms—only about five to ten thousand years ago, after millennia of more partnership-oriented societies. So yes, we can move back toward partnership. Not to return to some "good old days," but to build something new while still in motion, like flying the plane while we are building it.

The key is to focus on the four cornerstones that underlie both domination-oriented and partnership-oriented systems. First, childhood and family: neuroscience shows us how critical early experiences are. Second, gender: we know how roles are structured and the consequences. Third, economics: here too, the evidence is clear. Neoliberalism, which is neither new nor liberal,

is simply a form of economic domination. Like feudalism, it tells those at the bottom to be satisfied with scraps falling from the tables of those at the top. Fourth, story and language: the narratives that shape culture and justify hierarchy.

We are highlighting these issues in the upcoming Peace Begins at Home Summit, taking place on October 29, 2025, at peacebeginsathomesummit.org. The summit will bring together participants from seventeen nations, including many young people and scientists, to emphasize the importance of paying close attention to what children observe and experience in their early years. The good news is that change is possible. Our brains are highly flexible.

All of this is bombarding us, and yet we lack the frame to connect the dots. There is an alternative, even in language.

Think of how domination systems devalue females and the feminine through grammar. Romance languages—Spanish, Italian, French—default to the masculine in the plural. One man among five thousand women, and the plural in language is still masculine. If that is not an unconscious lesson in devaluing the feminine, I do not know what is.

English has started to shift. The use of "they," the conscious inclusion of "her" and "him"—these are small steps. However, they are emerging against the backdrop of a highly organized, worldwide regression toward domination. This is not confined to the United States. Moreover, for those socialized to believe the only alternative is domination—a lie, of course—change is tough. Transformative change seems almost impossible.

My late husband and colleague David Loye introduced the terms *norm maintainers* and *norm changers*. Most people fall somewhere in between, and they adapt to whatever the prevailing norm is. If the norm is domination, they go along with that. This makes it all the more crucial that we pay attention to what we value.

Everyone values caring and connection. As children, we cannot survive without it. However, domination systems restrict empathy to the in-group, and even then, only to those who conform rigidly. That is not sustainable. The bottom line—and I will say it again and again—is that domination systems are taking us to an evolutionary dead end.

We are interconnected not only by technologies of communication and transportation, but also by technologies of destruction—nuclear weapons, and more slowly, climate change. Domination systems cannot address these crises. Domination of nature, of other humans, of families, of economies—it is built into their logic. At this stage of human technological evolution, domination is maladaptive. Whether the threat is nuclear catastrophe or ecological collapse, the trajectory is the same: an evolutionary dead end.

So either we move further toward partnership, or it is curtains.

Jacobsen: What cultivates empathy in children? They must see empathy in action, and not just within the in-group. Domination systems limit empathy to the in-group and only to select members. Partnership systems, by contrast, extend empathy universally.

Eisler: In domination systems, children are taught to blame and shame. Partnership systems are not about blame or shame—certainly not about blaming our parents. They repeated what they themselves experienced and were taught. However, there is another way. Many young people today, including young men, are diapering and feeding babies, engaging in caregiving once dismissed as "women's work." This is very important.

I have always supported both the men's movement and the women's movement. I am a feminist, yes, but also a humanist and, above all, a *partnerist*. Because the alternative to patriarchy is not matriarchy; it is partnership. Prehistory and contemporary examples both show this.

Look at Ireland, which shifted almost overnight from rigid domination to partnership. There, you see both men and women in positions of leadership. In the Nordic nations, nearly half of the national legislatures are comprised of female members, and with that comes a focus on caring policies. These nations are not socialist, as some critics argue—they are partnership-oriented.

We need a new language. We need a new frame: the partnership-domination scale. Believe me, those pushing us back have a very rigid domination frame, and they are laser-focused on childhood and family. Consider the intense political attention given to controlling what children can learn, even to the point of banning ideas that might open their eyes to reality. This does not mean ignoring the good in American history—the founding rejection of monarchy was groundbreaking. However, we must also acknowledge the harm caused by the dominant heritage and the suffering it has produced.

Those pushing regression also pay careful attention to gender, as you noted with your imitation of U.S. politics. They pay enormous attention to economics—the new tax bills being celebrated as "beautiful" are written to favour domination structures.

I must say something about our present administration and President Trump. This is a deeply traumatized man, surrounded by deeply traumatized people, all shaped by domination in their families. They internalized a worldview that, as Trump himself put it, is all about domination. So the challenge is not to shame or blame them, but to understand that this was the only possibility they were given. The task is to convince the rest of the population that there is another way.

Our task now is to show that there is a better alternative. The partnership alternative requires shifting the four cornerstones—family and childhood, gender, economics, and story and language—from domination support to partnership support.

Jacobsen: What else should we cover?

Eisler: We have covered nearly everything. The narrative is key. Every one of us must pay attention to the lies we have been told about human nature. This is not a science-versus-religion issue. In fact, science is moving toward partnership. Two physicists recently won the Nobel Prize for their work on quantum entanglement—research showing deep interconnection at the subatomic level. Archaeology, too, is shifting, as I mentioned in relation to the Chinese findings.

There is even a film being made about me—*The Chalice and the Blade*—about my life and work, which are deeply interconnected. I am living proof that people can change radically. My

partnership with David Loye, my late husband, was central to that. We were together for forty-five years. It was not perfect—we fought—but we always reconciled. We could rely on one another, on acceptance, love, and care. Partnership is not only essential for survival, but for thriving. I could not have done my research without him.

Jacobsen: Last question: how can scholars, writers, and educators consciously shape partnership narratives without them feeling contrived?

Eisler: The first step is to live in partnership in our own lives. When a caring connection is authentic, it will not come across as artificial. Forgiveness also plays a role. It helps to understand that people who cling to dominant traditions are often traumatized. Recognizing that makes forgiveness freeing.

I will add one more thing: many on the left believe that if they can be on top, everything will be fine. However, that is not true. Look at the former Soviet Union: the "dictatorship of the proletariat," state capitalism—it was still domination. The fundamental shift is from hierarchies of domination to hierarchies of actualization and care. What has been dismissed as "feminine" activity—caring, nurturing—is actually the essence of being human. Deep down, we all value that.

Jacobsen: Riane, thank you very much for your time again today. I will see you next week, and as always.

Eisler: You are lovely. Take good care of yourself, my friend. Bye-bye.

Partnership Studies 11: Partnership Science, Human Rights, and Caring Economics

Scott Douglas Jacobsen interviews Riane Eisler on applying a partnership, whole-systems lens to science and economics. Eisler argues that science reflects cultural bias—invoking Galileo and gender myths—and notes that biology has corrected errors related to the ovum and fertilization. She critiques GDP for counting harm and ignoring caregiving and the value of nature, advancing Social Wealth Economic Indicators that prioritize care. Families and childhood are culturally embedded; punitive norms normalize violence, as recognized by the APA on spanking. She favours a universal basic income, plus caring policies, and Nordic legislatures. Rejecting "anything goes" relativism, Eisler grounds inquiry in human rights, caregiving, and environmental stewardship, urging a shift to partnership.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we are with the world-renowned Riane Eisler, lawyer and founder of partnership studies. We have a long list of topics, including science, philosophy of science, epistemology, ontology, and the intersection of science and the humanities. We will see if we cover them all or continue in another session. The plan, ambitiously, is to solve all the world's problems in 45 minutes.

Partnership studies take a whole-systems approach to science. I want to distinguish this from the term "holistic," which is common in the United States and often carries vague or non-technical connotations. "Whole systems" is preferable because it points to a more analytic framework. From a whole-systems perspective, how can partnership studies provide a much-needed facelift to scientific methodology?

Riane Eisler: We have all been taught certain assumptions, consciously and unconsciously—including scientists. Despite claims of objectivity, scientists are influenced by their cultural backgrounds. Viewed through the partnership–domination social scale, modern science shows cultural biases. People who perceived reality differently from the scientific establishment—Galileo Galilei, for example—were punished. His defence of heliocentrism led to a trial by the Roman Inquisition and house arrest. That illustrates how institutional power can police "acceptable" reality.

Dogmas, including those of the church, influenced intellectual life for centuries, especially regarding gender. The Adam and Eve narrative is one example. In earlier Mediterranean traditions, serpents were often linked to wisdom and renewal. At Delphi, the priestess known as the Pythia delivered oracles at a sanctuary mythically tied to the serpent Python. In Minoan Crete, figurines of a "snake goddess" depict a female figure holding snakes—symbols of power and cult practice. In that context, Eve consulting a serpent signified access to knowledge, not sin.

Later theocratic frameworks reinterpreted this symbolism. Eve's exchange with the serpent became disobedience, punished by an omniscient male deity. Early natural philosophy and later scientific theories echoed cultural biases about women. Following Aristotle, many Western thinkers held that the male provided the "form" or active principle, while the female contributed only passive matter. Well into the 19th century, some scientists still assumed women contributed

little beyond the womb. The human ovum was identified by Karl Ernst von Baer in 1827, and fertilization, as the fusion of egg and sperm, was demonstrated in the 1870s–1880s. These discoveries overturned the idea that women were merely containers.

Science, therefore, cannot be seen as a pure source of salvation. It has perpetuated, and continues to perpetuate, certain cultural dogmas. Not all science—ecology and environmental science, for example—recognizes Earth as an integrated system, but much of science still reflects the biases of its time.

The natural environment is the foundation of life; yet, human activities—such as carbon emissions from modern industrial technology—are accelerating destruction at a pace that the Earth cannot tolerate. In other words, we are destroying our natural habitat.

To evaluate these patterns, we need the partnership–domination social scale. Science, until recently, has done very little to examine family and childhood. Moreover, when it does, in psychology and neurology, it often pretends that families exist in a vacuum. However, families are embedded in cultures and subcultures.

Whether a family is violent and punitive or whether it avoids conflating caring with coercion depends on where it falls on the partnership–domination scale. This is linked to cultural norms—such as punishment. For example, when the American Psychological Association issued a statement condemning spanking, saying it harms children and normalizes violence, that was a significant step.

At our *Peace Begins at Home Summit*—and yes, you can still register at peacebeginsathomesummit.org.org—we emphasize this. Science must begin to uncover the biases we all carry. This is not about blame or shame. We have all inherited domination myths. Our task is to recognize them, because story and language are cornerstones of our work. Science tells stories, just as religion tells stories, and these stories shape what people think of as human nature.

Jacobsen: What about metrics like the Social Wealth Economic Indicators—ones that value care?

Eisler: At the Center for Partnership Systems, we launched the first iteration of such metrics. It was an early attempt, but it shows that care can and must be measured scientifically. For more information, please visit our website.

You can go to centerforpartnership.org, search for Social Wealth Economic Indicators—or SWEIs—and see our findings. Did we really make a difference? I believe we did. These metrics originated from my book, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*.

That book emphasized that both capitalism and socialism claim to be based on economics as a science. However, whether economics truly qualifies as a science is questionable, as some of its assumptions—such as the "rational man" model—are flawed. Neuroscience shows that people do not make choices as isolated rational actors. Our decisions are profoundly shaped by experiences

and observations, especially in childhood. How we feel, think, act, and even vote is influenced by where our families, cultures, and subcultures fall on the partnership–domination scale.

We are in the process—though it is difficult—of recognizing that much of what we have been told is false. Stories about human nature, particularly those concerning male and female natures, are myths inherited from more rigid domination times. These myths have also influenced economics.

This brings me back to why new metrics are important, particularly those that account for the economic value of caring and caregiving. Capitalism and socialism both omitted these three life-sustaining sectors from what was considered "economics."

These omitted sectors are the natural economic sector, the household economic sector, and the volunteer community sector. Both capitalist and social theory dismiss them as reproductive rather than productive. This omission has made GDP, which perpetuates this spurious distinction between “reproductive” and “productive,” a highly problematic measure of economic health.

One of my favourite examples is the tree. In GDP terms, a tree in the natural economy is counted only when it is dead, when it becomes a log that can be bought and sold. As for caregiving, Adam Smith and Karl Marx—founders of the theoretical bases of capitalism and socialism—were products of their time. They assumed the work of caring for children, the elderly, the sick, and everyone else would be done for free by women in male-controlled households.

That led to a highly problematic way of defining productivity. GDP also counts harmful activities as "productive." It includes the production and sale of fast food or cigarettes, and also accounts for the health costs and mortuary expenses associated with these products. This is why GDP is not only misleading but destructive as a measure of well-being. GDP cannot be used as an indicator of the harm we are inflicting on nature, our Mother Earth. Environmental disasters are intensifying, yet the damage they cause—as in the repair work these disasters require—all count as GDP.

Jacobsen: Traditional frameworks, such as those from Adam Smith or Karl Marx, treat only “productive” labour as a component of GDP. The so-called externalities, such as environmental damage, are only included as the market costs for repair or mitigation. We have been taught to think of all this as logical, but fundamentally, it is illogical. It is like a bad insurance policy—superficially balanced but deeply misleading.

Eisler: The reality is that the human and material costs of not caring for our natural environment are immense. Social Wealth Economic Indicators address this by incorporating education for caregiving and offering rewards for caregivers in the SWEIs. In current systems, caregiving only counts if it is in the market. The same work of caring for an ill person counts in GDP if you pay someone to do it, but not if a family member does it. That makes no sense.

Jacobsen: So let us take the science of care and calculation as an index. What is the approximate value, on average, in a standard advanced industrial economy with modern infrastructure?

Eisler: We have not entirely done the numbers, but a rough estimate would be immense. Organizations such as AARP have studied the economic value of family caregivers, and the contributions are enormous. The issue is not a lack of data but that our systems—accepted as measures of economic health—are entirely irrational.

Jacobsen: At ground level, or perhaps one stratosphere out, this connects to the philosophy of science. We are dealing with methodology and the assumptions embedded in it. How would a whole-systems approach to scientific methodology, in the same way that we incorporate care into the economy, make science more robust? For example, by acknowledging methodological errors or recognizing the integrative nature of systems, it is possible to improve a whole-systems model of philosophy of science. It first requires recognizing that the current economic rewards system is irrational and misleading. It excludes the work of caring for people or nature unless that work is monetized for a profit. What is the mitigating approach?

Eisler: That was a perfect statement, by the way. There are several approaches to this problem. One is a universal basic income. I have changed my thinking on this. In *The Real Wealth of Nations*, I argued that it should be tied to caring, but the bureaucracy required would be overwhelming.

We published an article in the *International Journal of Partnership Studies*—a peer-reviewed online journal from the University of Minnesota, inspired by my work—about this issue. The bureaucratic burden of tracking and verifying family caregiving was too much. So I have concluded that a universal basic income is a good idea. It would set a minimum standard if it is paid to every adult in a household. But alongside it, we would need caring policies, such as universal healthcare, well-paid childcare, and intense training for caregivers.

This is not a fantasy. The Nordic nations have moved further toward partnership by ensuring that women make up about 40–50 percent of legislatures. Gender construction is a fundamental distinction between domination and partnership systems. Today, we see a regression toward domination in reaction to the advances of the past 300 years, as evidenced by movements for women's rights, children's rights, racial justice, anti-racism, environmental protection, Peace, and economic and social justice.

In domination systems, gender definitions are rigid and inflexible. Masculine is ranked above feminine, and anything in between is not tolerated. This enforces in-group versus out-group thinking. A whole-systems approach, by contrast, includes family and childhood, which are central. However, we receive information about these realities in fragmented pieces, without a unifying framework. Those pushing us back toward domination, however, use a coherent frame — a domination frame that includes controlling children and restricting their exposure.

We must not normalize violence and in-group versus out-group thinking. A partnership approach values diversity. Gender is central to the current regression. Economically, we see an incredible accumulation of wealth at the very top of the scale.

Language and story are also crucial. In a domination system, those in charge will not tolerate any narrative that undermines their control. This is all part of whole-systems analysis. It requires

examining domination and partnership systems across childhood, gender, economics, story, and language.

Jacobsen: We should close with a favourite quote or a summary statement on science, philosophy of science, and partnership studies.

Eisler: We must re-examine everything. At the core of our religions, for example, are feminine teachings of caring, but overlaid with domination. In science, too, we must become aware of what truly matters in a whole-systems analysis. That analysis must include the whole of humanity—both its male and female halves—the whole of our lives, including family and intimate relations, and the whole of our history, including our prehistory..

Human prehistory shows millennia of partnership-oriented cultures. Domination systems emerged only five to ten thousand years ago, which is a very brief period in cultural evolutionary time. Understanding this changes the way people see the world and live in it.

If we believe that survival and thriving depend on moving toward a partnership paradigm, then we must actively accelerate this shift. I want to add that methodology, epistemology, and ontology—all these methods—carry assumptions. Recognizing and questioning them is part of the work.

One of the assumptions in whole-systems research using the partnership–domination social scale is that there are human rights standards. Not everything goes. Postmodernism, in claiming that there are no standards, essentially says anything goes. Without standards, people tend to revert to old patterns of domination. We must establish a new standard: one that respects human rights, fosters care, and promotes caregiving. That is built into the methodology.

Jacobsen: Thank you again for your time. I will see you next week.

Eisler: Thank you.

Partnership Studies 12: Partnership Systems, Caring Economics, and Human Rights

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler advances her partnership–domination framework as a whole-systems lens for social change. She argues that peace begins at home, that childhood caregiving and gender equity shape brains, policies, and democracies, and that caring economics measures real wealth beyond GDP. Drawing on neuroscience, history, and Nordic and other examples (including thousands of years of partnership-oriented prehistory), Eisler critiques fragmentation across religion, politics, and academia, urging the development of updated categories and methodologies such as relational dynamics, which analyze whole systems. She addresses backlash against equity, contrasts partnership and domination, and invites participation in the Peace Begins at Home Summit to accelerate humane, sustainable, and connection-centred societies.

Interview conducted October 4, 2025, in the afternoon Pacific Time.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Hello, and welcome again to Partnership Systems with Dr. Riane Eisler, attorney and founder of the Center for Partnership Systems. We have a global virtual conference on October 29, 2025. Please sign up! You can sign up for the Peace Begins at Home Summit.

Riane Eisler: Registration is at peacebeginsathomesummit.org. Please sign up, because it is going to be fabulous.

Jacobsen: It is the most wonderful time of the year outside of Christmas.

Eisler: It addresses the root causes of our problems rather than simply the symptoms. The alternative to domination systems is partnership systems. It is essential to discuss ontology (how we see the world) and epistemology (our method or lens for seeing the world) because the categories we are taught often fragment reality—such as religious versus secular, East versus West, and left versus right—leaving us with a fragmented picture of reality

If we are asking what we know and how we know it, we need better lenses. That has been my work: connecting the dots, including how the roles and relations of women and men (the two basic forms of humanity) are structured in a society; how children are raised; and how exposure to punitive, violent domination patterns—whether in families or religious settings—normalizes violence.

As usually framed, ontology and epistemology can be of limited practical use because inherited categories divide our consciousness and marginalize most of humanity— women and children.

From a deeper perspective, we need updated language and social categories to understand reality. My calling has been to clarify the underlying realities of two human possibilities: the partnership and domination ends of the social continuum.

Jacobsen: People who come from domination-oriented upbringings—especially religious backgrounds—are often taught to focus on the other world rather than what is right in front of

them. Their way of experiencing the world, their existential reality and epistemology, becomes frayed or dissociated from immediate meaning. How does that connect to partnership studies?

Eisler: It comes down to trauma. If we grow up in domination-oriented families—usually highly punitive, often violent—families that both care for us and hurt us, families we depend on for life, food, and shelter, we have to deny that they cause us pain. Denial then becomes a habitual part of how we perceive reality.

Religion plays a part in this, though I always emphasize that at the core of most world religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism—there are profound teachings about caring. I also distinguish between the biblical Judaism of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Judaism of the Diaspora, which emphasized mutual care; that is the tradition in which I was raised as a Jew.

But if we return to the central question—what is reality, and how do we know it?—We cannot understand society by looking only through the rigid categories inherited from more rigid domination times: religious versus secular, Eastern versus Western, Northern versus Southern, capitalist versus socialist, right versus left. These fragments our consciousness and make us focus narrowly.

Partnership and domination studies instead focus on two questions: first, what kinds of relations—whether interpersonal or international—does a culture support or inhibit, and second, what is the relationship between the key components of a social system? Two pillars are especially critical: how gender roles and relations are constructed, and how caregiving in families is structured, since most of us grow up in families.

I am interested in root causes rather than symptoms, and in strategic interventions to shift societies from domination toward partnership. Otherwise, we end up constantly putting out fires caused by domination systems, which keeps those systems intact.

Jacobsen: Much of science is stereotyped as looking only at particular parts of the world, ignoring the larger story. There is fragmentation across subfields, but then findings often begin to converge across disciplines—an ongoing multidisciplinary convergence. Where does partnership studies orient itself within those trends?

Eisler: Partnership studies are more concerned with the construction of social systems than with ultimate cosmological realities, such as string theory. Not that I'm not fascinated by those, but at best, they remain abstract.

Interestingly, two physicists have recently won the Nobel Prize in Physics for their work on quantum entanglement and its applications at the subatomic level. That reality is often ignored, and in fact, we are conditioned to ignore it by myths—religious myths like original sin or secular myths like selfish genes.

Take societies that have moved closer to partnership, where gender equity is greater, fathers share caregiving responsibilities, gender roles are more blurred, women hold 40–50 percent of parliamentary seats, and public policies are oriented toward care.

In Sweden, Finland, and Norway, for example, these societies not only support their own citizens but also invest a significant portion of their GDP in helping people elsewhere in the world, even those with no genetic ties to them.

This is why I am deeply skeptical about applying knowledge from other species directly to humans. Human evolution has brought with it the capacity for empathy—unless people are traumatized into suppressing it or restricting it only to their in-group, particularly to men positioned as controllers.

Jacobsen: How are you applying those foundations? I don't mean physics, but rather the social sciences—psychology, or perhaps cognitive developmental neuroscience—disciplines that can incorporate a partnership orientation into understanding social reality. You are really identifying the fundamentals of how people relate to one another along the partnership–domination social scale.

Eisler: The reason this scale is so important in understanding our cultural and social contexts is that psychology, and now neuroscience, have long made an assumption not supported by the evidence: they focus almost exclusively on individual families. But families do not arise in a vacuum.

Families are profoundly shaped by the norms and ideal norms of their culture or subculture. You cannot truly study them without whole-systems analysis. Studying different aspects of behaviour in isolation, or institutions in isolation from their context, fragments our consciousness. This is why there is such a need—both epistemologically and ontologically—for new categories. We cannot see reality clearly without holistic, whole-systems categories.

Jacobsen: Why is there a backlash now against partnership epistemology?

Eisler: It is a backlash against many organized social movements that have accelerated over the last 300 years, disrupting domination systems and creating disequilibrium. I draw on new theoretical frameworks that examine how living systems are organized and how they change. Societies are complex living systems.

If we only examine isolated institutions, such as the family, we cannot fully comprehend them. The family must be understood in its larger cultural context. Of course, some families don't conform, but if the ideal norm in society rejects equity and denies the value of diversity, that cultural framing shapes everything.

These are not just family questions but deeply cultural ones. And when it comes to religion, I always return to this: at the core of most religious traditions are teachings of interconnection.

The first point I want to make about both ontology and epistemology—about what we know and how we know it—is that they are culturally constructed. They depend primarily on the categories provided by language, especially social categories.

That is crucial to keep in mind. Due to my background and life experiences, my calling has been to discover, through whole-systems analysis, an alternative perspective on societies that

transcends conventional categories, such as right and left, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern, and capitalist and socialist.

All of these categories were inherited from more rigid domination times, rather than partnership times. They fragment our consciousness, focusing on separate aspects—geography, faith, economics—and force us constantly to jump between them. This fragmentation does not serve us well.

The first point, then, is that ontology and epistemology are culturally influenced, shaped by language and the categories available to us. The second point is that when we look at social reality through a non-fragmenting, whole-systems lens—the partnership–domination social scale—we begin to see patterns and connections that would otherwise remain invisible.

To do this, I developed a methodology called the Study of Relational Dynamics, which focuses on a fundamental question neglected by earlier categories: what kinds of relations exist? Are they punitive and violent, or are they caring and mutually respectful? Does a particular social system support or inhibit such ties?

A second crucial question—again often ignored in conventional approaches—is: what are the key elements of a society that must be considered in analyzing its fundamental character? How do they mutually reinforce one another, either sustaining or shifting a society toward partnership or toward more rigid domination?

These elements include areas that conventional frameworks often marginalize: first, the structure of gender roles and relations between men and women; and second, childhood and family life. Neuroscience tells us that what children experience and observe—primarily within families—shapes nothing less than the brain itself, influencing how we think, feel, act, and even vote. Yet our inherited categories largely ignore this knowledge.

Much of it comes down to those first five years of life, when our brains—still forming at birth—rapidly grow, develop synapses, and build connections. You do not need to be particularly clever to grasp this, but you do need a different worldview, one that connects rather than fragments.

Jacobsen: Who would you consider your intellectual predecessors, individually? And which cultures were most oriented toward partnership in pre-contemporary millennia?

Eisler: That's a serious question. To start, cultures that deny climate change are cultures in deep denial of reality itself. Consider Russia, for example: its economy depends heavily on fossil fuel exports, so there is little incentive to acknowledge the crisis. The Soviet Union was similar. Lake Baikal was severely polluted, and of course, there was the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The pattern was to exploit nature as quickly and as fully as possible.

By contrast, many of the Nordic nations that have moved toward the partnership side demonstrate a different pattern. Their legislatures are 40 to 50 percent women. Fathers take active roles in caregiving. There is a greater gender balance in politics, parenting, and family life, as well as recognition of climate change and efforts to address it.

Norway is an interesting contradiction—it relies heavily on oil exports, yet its broader social principles are firmly rooted in partnership values. At some point, the oil will run out, and we will see whether partnership principles ultimately prevail.

Partnership also includes harmony with nature, rather than the domination worldview we inherited from religious traditions that taught "dominion over nature."

Jacobsen: Returning to individuals, then, who do you consider your intellectual predecessors? Who fills the acknowledgments in your books?

Eisler: Well, there are many intellectual predecessors, half of whom I disagree with completely. Take St. Thomas Aquinas. In his attempt to understand reality, he said some absurd things. For example, in accepting hierarchies of domination, he claimed that questioning your social status would be like a nose wanting to be an eye.

That isn't very smart. He also argued that original sin is caused by sex, which is equally irrational. Yet people are taught this. Parents take their children to see violent films without concern, but if there is any sex, then it is considered immoral.

I wrote a whole book on this called *Sacred Pleasure*, where I introduced the concept of the erotization of domination and violence, as in James Bond movies. In domination systems we've seen sexuality either vilified, treated as sinful, or equated with domination.

For instance, the missionary position enshrines the man on top. Or sexuality is linked to violence, as in pornography. In *Sacred Pleasure* I make a clear distinction between erotica and pornography because they are *not* the same.

You also asked about the epistemology of religion. In epistemology, you can have subjective or so-called objective criteria. But the so-called objective criteria are always socially conditioned. What shapes society? It's ideal norms. Suppose society insists that men are superior to women. In that case, you end up with "scientific knowledge" that perpetuates the myth that woman contributes nothing to reproduction—that she is merely a container.

Jacobsen: What you're getting at is more about the orientation of the findings themselves, rather than a rejection of the conclusions.

Eisler: What findings? They only ever found what they wanted to believe was true.

Jacobsen: Well, positive accidents happen—like penicillin, or LSD.

Eisler: But look, it's not science versus religion. At the core of all religious scriptures are teachings of partnership—caring, caregiving, nonviolence, and the empathic principle of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Then you get the dominator overlay: myths blaming Eve for humanity's ills, Pandora in Greek mythology, or the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are pure propaganda for domination. I plan to write more about this because once you examine it closely, it becomes fascinating.

The broader point is that humanity is awakening from a state of domination. For the past 5,000 to 10,000 years, societies have shifted toward domination, embedding it in categories, myths, and norms—such as the paterfamilias as the head of the household. This is our cultural inheritance, and changing it is our task.

Jacobsen: What about how science is being applied in the humanities, too?

Eisler: What were the humanities? They were traditionally defined by the works of long-dead, primarily white, men. But that is not the totality of the humanities. Even if we accept the term "human" in humanities as inclusive, the truth is that human rights concepts affecting everyone, including women, should be part of the humanities.

The “emancipation” of women should be part of the humanities. Children's rights—to be raised without violence and trauma—should be part of the humanities. Not everything Aristotle said should be canonized. Much of it was harmful. For example, he claimed that women and enslaved people were "born that way" and therefore naturally subordinate. That is deductive logic misapplied.

Jacobsen: Surprisingly similar to some Hindu traditions.

Eisler: You asked me earlier why there is currently a regression to domination. Let me answer that directly. We rarely consider this regression in the broader historical context. Over the last 300 years, as the Industrial Revolution gained momentum, it created profound disequilibrium. During the same period, organized movements emerged to challenge the same thing: domination traditions.

The Enlightenment and the Rights of Man movement challenged the supposedly divinely ordained right of kings to rule over their "subjects." The feminist movement challenged the supposedly divinely ordained right of men to rule over women and children in their homes.

Abolitionists, the civil rights movement, and Black Lives Matter challenged the supposedly divinely ordained right of a "superior" race to dominate an "inferior" one. The environmental movement challenged the tradition of "dominion"—the idea that man alone counts, with the right to rule over all living things.

The peace movement challenged violence itself, which is central to domination systems because they rely on fear to maintain power. The movement for economic and social equity—not sameness, but equity—challenged domination economics, whether in the form of emperors, sheikhs, tsars, feudal lords, or neoliberal "trickle-down" economics.

In every case, those at the top claimed divine or natural justification, while those below were told to content themselves with the scraps. This system even encouraged the oppressed to identify with their oppressors, living in denial of their own subordination.

Today, we see regression in renewed efforts to reassert male dominance, impose rigid gender stereotypes, and deny the existence of gay and transgender people—even though LGBTQ+

people have existed throughout history. We also see renewed attempts to tighten control over children, including what they are taught, as part of maintaining domination.

Jacobsen: Next time, we had governance and political theory on the agenda, and how Machiavelli melded fear, like Trump. Do you have any preliminary thoughts on that before we proceed?

Eisler: Well, someone teaching at a religious law school in Southern California used my work and contrasted it with Machiavelli's theory of power. Power can be viewed in two ways: chalice power and blade power. In other words, domination power or partnership power.

Jacobsen: It's not a one-to-one mapping between Machiavelli and Trump. Machiavelli was a legitimate political strategist. Trump is more like a bull in a china shop.

Eisler: Well, he's a circus barker.

Jacobsen: Yes, that's a good way to put it.

Eisler: And he really is skilled at manipulating people—especially evangelicals—pretending that he cares about them, when in reality he is deeply traumatized and unstable, frankly.

I wrote in *Sacred Pleasure* that deconstructionism is a very conservative way of looking at the world. If there are no standards, what do people fall back on? The old domination standards. But there are standards—human rights standards.

It really comes back to that: we have not yet found universal acceptance of human rights standards. That is still a developing field. Remember, the concept of children's rights is a relatively recent development.

Jacobsen: That's the most signed-on-to convention. 192 of 193 member states have ratified it. The last to sign was Somalia. The only one that signed but never ratified, more than three decades ago, is the United States.

Eisler: The United States is a country that consciously or unconsciously believes in domination.

Jacobsen: It's a human rights pariah in specific domains.

Eisler: I wouldn't put it that way. It is a country with a complicated mix of partnership and domination. There are countries, like Afghanistan, that have long traditions of domination, of huge gaps between those on top and bottom, of authoritarian rule and violence, where gender inequality is paramount. Or fundamentalist Iran, same thing: much more domination.

They throw gay people off cliffs, hang them, kill them, and burn them. And now the United States is in the midst of a regression toward domination, but I don't think it can last—not with the damage it's doing and the suffering it's causing.

Jacobsen: This huge category of angry and concerned people. There are also more educated women than ever before, and that is not a rising tide you can sink.

Eisler: You really can't, and, interestingly, the new Archbishop of Canterbury is a woman.

Jacobsen: Well, that transition had more to do with stepping down in shame over failures with the sexual abuse scandal, right? So that's one thing. This was a PR move. The stronger case is Iceland: three of the four major parties are led by women. The Prime Minister, the President, and the head of the national church are all women. That's a more direct case.

Eisler: I agree that some of it was politics of convenience, shame, and PR. But the whole winner-loser two-party system of the United States is a disaster.

Jacobsen: It's a weird system where even when one party wins, both sides of the population lose. The Democratic Party, in many ways, is a center-right party. In the U.S., they're considered left, but in Europe, they'd likely be regarded as center-right, because they're still a party of war.

Eisler: In Europe at least, the system forces the parties to work together, since coalition-building is required to form a government.

Jacobsen: Yeah, that's true.

Eisler: So the system itself is not a good one in the United States, and every attempt to establish a third party here has been a total failure.

Jacobsen: Bernie [Sanders] fell.

Eisler: Yes.

Jacobsen: But he was torpedoed by the Democrats. That's the thing.

Eisler: With both parties, the first step forward would be to abolish this notion that money is speech.

Jacobsen: Right, Citizens United, too.

Eisler: And to change the First Amendment, because hate speech is very, very powerful.

Jacobsen: That second proposal is implausible to happen in the United States.

Eisler: Well, it may. It has happened elsewhere—for example, in Canada, where certain restrictions on pornography were upheld, though they weren't here.

Jacobsen: But you're dealing with a much different culture in Canada, too, a much more British culture in Canada.

Eisler: It may be a more British culture. However, the United States was founded by men of their time—men who were enslavers and excluders of women, and most men, men without a certain amount of property. That's the story of the country. Still, it was the first nation not to have a monarchy and not to idealize it.

Jacobsen: Well, I think you've gone back to the time of the Orange King.

Eisler: Look, there were attempts..

Anyway, the Fibonacci numbers tell us something about both ontology and epistemology—that our focus has been very selective. These numbers, as we will discuss separately, connect us to epistemology and ontology—how we know what is true and what is or is not a cultural construct, to the partnership-domination scale. We have not had the lenses to understand how different these questions and their answers are in partnership versus domination systems, or in societies where the two are in conflict.

That is what we need to understand. It is not about blame or shame. We inherited these domination worldviews from earlier, more authoritarian, male-dominated times. Remember what I said about St. Augustine? He was a spokesman for his time.

But it isn't religion. It isn't faith. The fact is, there is so much we cannot understand through "objective" observation. We do not have the necessary equipment to understand some things, such as the Fibonacci numbers. Why does this ratio appear? Is Einstein right that "God does not play dice with the universe," whatever that means? I've never figured it out. But it suggests that Einstein suspected some design in the universe.

Jacobsen: Right, yes. He did say that. There's a letter he wrote to a man who asked him about God, and in it, he was very clear. He was generous in tone, but he did not endorse belief in God or traditional religion. In fact, he dismissed religious fables as essentially childish. He was actually quite sharp in parts of that letter. There are moments, however, where he made his position very clear and mentioned how there were deliberate lies spread about him in the public sphere. Many of which continue today. Anyways, thank you very much for your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 13: Faith, Gender, and the Partnership–Domination Paradigm in Religion

In this in-depth dialogue with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler discusses the intersection of religion, gender, and power within her partnership–domination framework. Eisler explains how faith-based systems can either reinforce domination—through fear, obedience, and male supremacy—or foster partnership, emphasizing love, care, and equality. She traces patriarchal control from ancient myths and religious dogma to modern politics, linking domination systems to violence and ecological neglect. Eisler advocates re-examining cultural narratives, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to modern media, to dismantle misogyny and revalue caring work. Through conscious cultural evolution, she argues, humanity can transcend domination and build societies grounded in empathy and mutual respect.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Welcome to Riane Eisler on partnership studies. Thank you for joining me again. We’re on partnership studies number ten or eleven; I’ll confirm that in the transcript. Today’s topic is everyone’s favourite dinner table discussion over Christmas — religion, life after death, death, domination systems, justifications for domination systems, abortion, and related issues. Let’s start with the big picture: what is faith, or what is religion as an expression of faith?

Riane Eisler: That’s a difficult question because we all must have some faith. The question is whether there is fear associated with that faith. Is there guilt, in-group versus out-group division, anger, or not? Do we assume, as many religions that support what I call domination systems do, that what counts is not “this vale of tears”—the world in which we all live—but what happens before we are born and after we die?

Much of the emphasis in religions that maintain domination lies in the assumption that what really matters, as in the crusade against abortion, concerns what happens before we are born. Similarly, in religions that assume we will go to hell if we do not believe in their doctrine, or to heaven if we do, what matters is what happens after we die. The space in between is assumed to be one of suffering, as expressed in the medieval phrase “vale of tears.”

Many reform movements—such as the Unitarians and some of the more progressive branches of the Presbyterians or of Judaism—have emphasized something else: what we do while we are here on this planet, while we are alive. Love, which lies at the core of all our scriptures—caring, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you—is emphasized, rather than being applied only to the male members of the in-group.

Jacobsen: Do the societal patterns you identify in partnership and domination models of society appear here as well? For instance, in a faith-based system that is more domination-oriented, you find more violence. In contrast, in those that are more partnership-oriented, you see greater gender equity. Are those patterns evident in these forms of human activity, too?

Eisler: Absolutely. The moment you introduce fear, the question becomes: fear of what? Fear of violence, of punishment. In male-dominated societies—patriarchies—that fear becomes

associated with a male deity. Gender is built into everything. It is not just a “women’s issue.” It is a central organizing principle for families, religions, societies, and economies. However, we have not been fully aware of it. Changing consciousness, therefore, involves, in a significant way, changing our consciousness about gender.

Jacobsen: The sacralization of rank, control, and domination within religious systems. You have this fear of death, this unknown of what happened before we were born or where we are going—if anywhere—when we die. At least we can have control here and now, and I can be the one to impose it, Mr. So-and-so. Any thoughts?

Eisler: That is a domination system. What you are pointing out is that religion can be, as we see in the Unitarian Universalist tradition and in some of the more progressive branches of other faiths—as we see in Judaism, particularly in Reform Judaism, or even in Conservative Judaism—differs from what we see in Orthodox traditions. In Orthodox Judaism, there is love, but it is love for the male who must study the Torah and Talmud, and women are expected to help him do that. Women play a very active role in Orthodox Judaism. Still, they are thoroughly socialized—one might say indoctrinated—to do so.

Jacobsen: Within Jewish communities, these were often the elite intellectual men and families, were they not?

Eisler: The elite intellectual men and families, yes. Religions that uphold and support domination are unfailingly structured with man on top—as in “God-fearing”—and God, of course, is male. It requires a tremendous amount of acrobatics because Yahweh, or Jehovah, was originally a war god, and the story of Eve and Adam being expelled from the Garden is such a blend of older mythologies.

Why would—a question I asked as a child—a woman ask advice from a snake? It’s not something we usually do. Yet, under the old reality and even after the prehistoric shift to domination, consider the Oracle of Delphi: she was a priestess, a woman working with a python, a snake that symbolized oracular prophecy. It made perfect sense for Eve, in the older symbolic order, to ask advice from a snake. But under the new dominator reality, she was punished for it.

Think also of the prehistoric Minoan goddess-priestess figures with snakes coiled around their arms in trance. That represents the old religion, which we can only partly reconstruct. Still, there were priestesses—there is no question about that. And they were associated with snakes and oracular wisdom.

All the so-called goddess and priestess figurines from prehistory are a testament to that, and they’re all, as Merlin Stone wrote, in the basements of museums. It’s fascinating that if you see a male figure, he’s called a god or a priest; if you see a female figure, she’s labelled a woman. Of course, she was often a priestess or a deity, because that was the mythical reality in those days.

We’re now discovering so much about prehistoric belief systems, about social structures in our prehistory. Recently, and this was reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, of all places, owned by

Murdoch no less, Chinese archaeologists uncovered an ancient prehistoric society that was matrilineal and relatively egalitarian.

However, we're given all this information in fragments, and my work has been about "connecting those dots." To do that, you need the framework of the partnership–domination scale, a whole-systems methodology. The more a religion supports and sanctifies domination and violence, the more it serves as an instrument of the domination system. The more it emphasizes the core teachings—what we might call the feminine-coded values in domination systems—such as love and caring, the more it reflects our shared human capacity and need for connection.

So, it isn't religion per se that is the problem, but rather religions that lean towards the domination side of the social scale. They are harmful not only to their adherents—often deeply traumatized individuals drawn to them—but also to all of us. I can attest to this from my own experience attending a Methodist school in Cuba. When Dr. Muñoz, the principal, asked who believed in Jesus Christ, I finally grew tired of being the only child who didn't raise her hand. There was tremendous pressure to conform, to proselytize, and to not "tolerate"—a word I dislike—rather than truly accept difference.

Regressions to domination always produce violence. Religions that lean toward domination consistently frame gender through fixed, ranked stereotypes—masculine over feminine. Yet semantically, the alternative to patriarchy is not matriarchy. It is partnership.

The evidence from prehistory shows clearly that societies in which women were priestesses and held power were not matriarchies. For example, in Minoan Crete, there are depictions of both male priests and priestesses. The assumption that dominating and being dominated are the only alternatives is a projection of our own conditioning. In Greta Gerwig's film *Barbie*, the story explores the dilemma of whether to adopt a matriarchy rather than a patriarchy. Still, the film ultimately points toward more complex possibilities than simply swapping rulers. You can't merely have women in charge; you need partnership, which includes, of course, enlightened men.

Jacobsen: As far as my limited knowledge goes, most movements for gender equity, particularly around women's equality, have included a substantial majority of women, alongside a smaller but essential cohort of enlightened men. Without those men, progress wouldn't have been possible. You even need a weak partnership model to make any real progress toward universalism.

Eisler: Yes, there are more and more enlightened men. The whole men's movement—figures such as Gary Barker and Jackson Katz—reflects that. They have worked on men's engagement in gender equity and preventing violence. They embrace caring for men, showing that men, though still a minority in caregiving roles historically, are increasingly taking on traditional caregiving responsibilities, such as diapering and feeding babies, and engaging in what we traditionally call "mothering"—caring work.

The gender stereotypes are being questioned. And that's one of the primary reasons, as you can see in these regressions to domination, for the renewed insistence on reinstating the male as head

of household, as superior, as decision-maker. These frameworks connect gender and domination and aim to return to those old dominator stereotypes—that only the “masculine” is entitled to rule, just as God is entitled to dominate through fear and force.

Jacobsen: Another aspect of those narratives—the gods themselves are often framed as male. The extreme example, I think, is Protestant and Catholic Christianity, where the primary feminine counter-image is the Virgin Mary. You have Rachel and others, but generally speaking, it all collapses into imagery of motherhood and virginity.

Eisler: That’s the only role for women in a strict patriarchy, which classical Greece certainly exemplified in many ways. In ancient Athens, the “good” women were confined to the household, to the “women’s quarters.” At the same time, the *hetairai* often served as courtesans and companions with social roles distinct from respectable wives.

Jacobsen: It’s almost a pretty title — it even sounds lyrical.

Eisler: The *hetairai* were the ones present at men’s feasts—companions and entertainers. There’s this dynamic, like in Jung’s concepts of animus and anima, where the anima has no independent identity except in relation to the male animus. She’s either a man’s temptation or a man’s inspiration. We’ve been conditioned to see women as existing simply to be men’s “helpers,” right?

Jacobsen: De-agentified, basically. There’s no autonomy.

Eisler: Absolutely no autonomy. And all this talk about ego being the problem—frankly, women have struggled in this second phase of feminism to develop an ego, to have an identity that is truly their own. In the domination mythology, women are still expected to lack one. So, there’s much work to do. That’s where the Four Cornerstones come in, and where the project I’ve long envisioned becomes vital: bringing together genuinely progressive representatives of all religions to sort out the essence—the actual grain of their teachings—from the dominator overlay. Until that happens, religion will continue to be used against us.

A Sufi Muslim once told me quietly that while he agreed this is an essential way to address how religion is being weaponized to justify domination, he couldn’t participate—because clerics might issue a fatwa calling for his death.

Did you know that toward the end of the war, Hitler issued an edict allowing German soldiers to have four wives, like the Koran allows for Muslim men? He said it was to boost morale. But of course, it was the reinstatement of rigid gender stereotypes.

Jacobsen: There you go. Was that under Christian auspices at that point, or was it more of a secular fascist policy?

Eisler: It was a mess, really, because as you know, some Christian denominations actively supported Hitler.

Jacobsen: Yes, they did.

Eisler: Gender was absolutely central to his ideology. However, it's rarely discussed except in my books and in Claudia Koonz's work. The role of gender in authoritarian movements is profoundly underexamined. You can see the same dynamic resurfacing today in the United States. With the current administration, it's pretty clear that gender is at the heart of the regression.

Jacobsen: I've always felt that the American portrayals of World War II—especially on popular channels—miss the point. It's all about battle strategies, generals, “heroes,” and the hardware—guns, tanks, bombers, munitions. They rarely engage with Hitler's ideological obsessions. And when modern podcasts do cover it, they focus on things like the drugs the Nazis used, rather than the psychological and ideological pathology driving it all.

Eisler: It was so clear. In Nazi propaganda, Jews were blamed for the so-called emancipation of women. It was right there in front of everyone's eyes, but people didn't see it—they didn't connect the dots. Gender was absolutely central.

We're always brought back to the Four Cornerstones, as they serve as the pillars supporting either domination systems or partnership systems, beginning with childhood and family. If we connect the dots, we see how crucial is what children observe, experience, and are taught in families that are dominated. They learn fear. They learn that punitive violence from those in power is normal. They know the supposed superiority—because they see it in their families and cultures—of men over women, of the “masculine,” as defined by domination systems, over the “feminine,” which is equated with weakness, caring, caregiving, and nonviolence. Those qualities are treated as flaws for men!

It's all interconnected. Gender informs economics, too. I often repeat: What do children see? If they grow up seeing the ranking of male and “masculine” over female and “feminine,” they internalize the equation of *difference* with superiority and inferiority, dominance and submission, serving and being served. Think of the old photographs—women standing behind men who sit and are served. That visual hierarchy translates directly into economics. That's why gender stereotypes, and their ranking, is essential for the maintenance or imposition of domination across the board.

Both capitalist and socialist systems exclude the three life-sustaining sectors from their economic models: the natural economy, the volunteer community economy, and the household or family economy. For instance, a tree—on which we depend for absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen—is counted in GDP only when it's dead, when it's a log to be bought and sold. Only then is it considered “productive.” Similarly, you can work from dawn to dusk caring for children, the sick, or the elderly, and none of that counts as “productive” labour. It's labelled “reproductive.” Unless someone is paid for it.

If a housekeeper or an au pair performs the same work, it suddenly becomes “productive.” This was by design. Both Adam Smith and Karl Marx—reflecting the assumptions of their time—believed that caring and caregiving were women's unpaid duties within a male-controlled household. Neither addressed care for our natural life-support systems, which were also marginalized as merely reproductive.

It's absurd. We must transform how we reward and value caring and caregiving—in *both* market and non-market sectors. That's what we've worked on at the Center for Partnership Systems: creating new ways to measure what truly matters. Because we value what we measure, and we measure what we value.

In developing the Social Wealth Economic Indicators or SWEIs, we began by asking: how many children receive adequate care? How many don't? We measured both inputs and outputs, as most so-called alternatives to GDP only measure outputs, providing a snapshot of the system at one point in time. We also wanted to measure the investments—the inputs that make a caring society possible.

Jacobsen: What about in faith-based systems—the psychological mechanisms that function like an economy? The pleasures and pains of work and reward, but applied to things that, as far as we can tell, don't exist outside the believer's perception. There's this idea of deferring gratification for celestial payoffs: rivers of milk and honey, seventy-two virgins—or white raisins, depending on the translation—union with God, or a better reincarnation next time, maybe as a Brahmin instead of a labourer. What's the psychological economy of that in partnership studies? How does it fit into the religious myths? It seems to tie in nicely with the central theme here.

Eisler: You've touched on something essential. Religions that support domination teach that obedience is what truly matters. That's the core psychological attitude—obedience and praise. Praise of the dominator deity. “Thy will be done.” “Praise be to God.” I recently attended a concert featuring Mozart's *Mass*, which is beautiful music. Still, they projected the lyrics, and I honestly wished they hadn't. The words were psychopathic: “We obey you, we venerate you, we worship you.” It was all submission to power.

Jacobsen: That reminds me of that Monty Python scene—Michael Palin as the priest, the boys singing, “Oh Lord, you are so *absolutely* huge.”

Eisler: Exactly! “Oh Lord.” Think about that word for a moment—*Lord, King of Kings*. What does it imply? Historically, the feudal lord was venerated and even had the so-called “right of the first night” with a serf's bride. It was grotesque. Yet we still call God “Lord.” The language reveals the structure: domination.

There was, for a time, a movement to broaden that language—to speak of “God and Goddess,” or simply “the powers that be.” But the current regressions are pushing back hard against that inclusive trend. Take creationism, for example. The pope—the head (another revealing word) of the Catholic Church—once said that evolution is compatible with creationism. And I would agree that there is some design in our universe, but only if we're not talking about the creationism of the Lord, the dominator deity who demands obedience.

Jacobsen: Evolution is too subtle for that worldview.

Eisler: Science, modern Western science, originated in a world, in the words of the historian of science David Noble, a world without women—and also, I would add, a world without children. Only gradually did science begin to open those boundaries. I mean, Galileo, for example,

challenged the “scientific” orthodoxy of his time by asserting that the Earth revolves around the sun, not the other way around. He was punished for that—tried by the Roman Inquisition in 1633, forced to recant, and kept under house arrest for the rest of his life.

Jacobsen: There’s another aspect of faith that ties into generational thinking. Many traditions speak in supernatural or superstitious terms—curses passed from “fathers unto sons unto sons”—as though morality were genetic and punishment hereditary. But these same texts also carry an obsession with lineage. There’s deep time embedded in them. Even the gods themselves, whether in polytheistic or later monotheistic systems, have genealogies. Christianity, for example, compresses it into one paradoxical figure—God making himself his own son, dying, resurrecting, and promising to return. Technically, that would be a third appearance.

Yet underneath all of that is reproduction—control of women’s reproductive choices. When to have children, if at all, how many, under what circumstances. The pill, mifepristone—these are astonishingly recent in human history. But they’ve undercut the ideological structures that depended on controlling women’s fertility. And now we’re seeing a backlash, an attempt to reassert those mandates.

What do you make of this? Of the technological undermining of those old controls—and the pushback that’s followed? How do you see partnership systems advancing amid such overwhelming pressures on every part of life?

Eisler: Well, look, I have—and this started with my book *The Chalice and the Blade*, which was the first stemming from my multidisciplinary, whole-systems approach. In that book, which came out in 1986, I argued that we have a choice between breakdown and breakthrough in evolution.

I also argued that, in our time of what I call “technologies of destruction”—nuclear weapons, and more slowly climate change, both of which are human creations—we have to shift to partnership: to an understanding of our interconnection, to a more nonviolent way of relating. Otherwise, eventually—and perhaps quite suddenly with a nuclear bomb, even a suitcase bomb—our species is doomed.

So this is so obvious to me. And yet, many people are in denial about it. The domination system, at our current level of technological development, if guided by an ethos of domination, can take us to an evolutionary dead end.

Jacobsen: Most of us are in denial about this, to keep on going. But that’s the reality. I mean, do partnership studies applied to faith-based systems imply the building of new narratives, or dissolving a little bit of the dominant narratives and allowing people to formulate their own sense of agency without them?

Eisler: Well, it really requires both. I’m working with Melanie Lynch on deconstructing *The Odyssey*, because Homer was the great propagandist for the imposition of the domination system. If you look at *The Odyssey*, it is full of clues about an earlier society in which women held power—but they’re now primarily vilified in the story.

Think of the Sirens, who are portrayed as deadly to men. There's no evidence of that anywhere, but there you have it.

What you see in the *Odyssey* are influential female figures, yet they're depicted as monsters. Charybdis is a monster; Scylla is a monster. Odysseus must navigate between them to avoid destruction. Circe and Calypso—he lives with them, has sexual relationships with them—and they “hold” him through attraction. They're framed as dangerous or immoral. Penelope, of course, is the loyal wife; yet Odysseus gains his power through her. And he has Telemachus kill the slave girls who first clean up the mess after Odysseus kills the suitors vying for Penelope to marry them so they can gain power, and then these female slaves are executed for having had relations with the suitors, whether willingly or under coercion. It doesn't matter; Odysseus commands that they be killed.

It's the normalization and glorification of the hero as a killer. And it's really about relegating females—who once, and still, held power in partnership with men—to a subordinate position.

The Iliad, of course, starts with the “moral issue” of whether the king Agamemnon or the warrior Achilles should possess the “prize” of war—a woman, a human being, now a slave—without any concern for what she might have thought of all this. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* normalize the hero as a killer and frame patriarchal violence as virtue.

But we also have to make up new partnership-oriented stories. So, it's a process of deconstruction and reconstruction at the same time. One is not exclusive of the other.

We need to deconstruct many of the false stories we've been told. But we also must reconstruct—and feminists, for example, have reconstructed a lot of the fairy tales that children, girls and boys, are told, which are such idealizations of nobility: the king, the prince, the male, and of female “helplessness,” so much so that a Sleeping Beauty can't even wake up without a prince, a male, a superior, a dominator.

It's always the older woman who is the villain. In contrast, it's the innocent young woman who is subordinate and subservient and grateful to the prince for rescuing her. Talk about teaching learned helplessness here—and teaching boys that men are the superiors, and nobles are even more superior than other men, and so on.

I did a radio show where I just made fun of this—this was in the sixties—the idea of somehow being able to fit into the princess slipper, because that's what it was. You had to mold yourself to fit into the prince's slipper: to fulfill his needs and to be helpless, no matter what the cost.

But I was furious at that time. And then I stopped being angry. I stopped blaming and shaming. And I realized that men are also in terrible shape in the domination system.

I used to wear those stiletto high heels—my God. I don't know how people put up with that. I don't know how I walked then, but I don't wear these heels anymore.

Jacobsen: So, I want to do a couple of things. I've got to give credit where credit's due—this was not me pointing this out. This was a Jewish woman criminal lawyer who I travelled with in

the Summer. She astutely had noted that Schopenhauer had a decidedly negative image of women—that’s putting it mildly.

He had an essay titled *On Women*. He writes that in societies where monogamy is the norm, “to marry means to halve one’s rights and double one’s duties.” He claims that women are “by nature meant to obey.” He describes them as childish, short-sighted, and intuitive rather than rational, asserting that they are deficient in justice. Some scholars have called him the arch-misogynist—in the sense that he is uncompromising and systematic, rather than incidentally prejudiced. This misogyny was not peripheral but foundational to his worldview; his values and philosophical conclusions flowed downstream from that mountain. He critiqued marriage, partnership, and monogamy.

He built this as part of his metaphysical and ethical system. So this may be the first instance of which I’m aware—and again, I cannot take credit for pointing this out; it required further light research for me to see it—of what might be called metaphysical misogyny. I mean, there are transcendentalist versions of misogyny that appear in theologies involving gods or divine hierarchies. Still, Schopenhauer’s philosophy was distinct in that it was metaphysical without necessarily invoking a god, just from one man’s system.

What are your reflections on individuals like him who built entire philosophical schools?

Eisler: He wasn’t alone. I mean, look at Aristotle. Among his so-called wisdoms was the idea that enslaved people and women are meant to be subordinate because they were “born” that way—born into slavery, born women. Period. Deductive logic in a loop.

Nietzsche—Nietzsche was a misogynist *par excellence*. And strangely he’s often quoted by scholars who should know better as a philosopher who valued freedom. But, of course, that freedom was only for males. He was very clear that it did not apply to women, who were meant to be subordinate.

And even into the modern era, before genetics was widely understood, influential scientific lore held that only men passed on hereditary traits—that women were merely vessels. We think that scientists are free of bias because they’re called “objective,” which is absolutely absurd.

So our job is to examine all of these myths, deconstructing and reconstructing them. Because people need stories. People live by stories. And I pointed this out already in *The Chalice and the Blade*.

We need stories that show the advantages of partnership. And there are many of them. Findings from science again—though often isolated—show, for example, that sex is much better when both partners, including the woman, enjoy it.

So these truths exist. But the old patriarchal logic says: men, you use the bodies of women. And women have internalized this—thinking somehow that they’re sexually free, “liberated,” when they perform hyper-sexualized acts for male approval, like twerking in pop culture.

Take the example of Miley Cyrus in that famous performance. A friend of mine, Brie Mathers, wrote an excellent book exposing this illusion—that so many young women have internalized because it’s socially rewarded—the idea that if they become more effective sex objects by enjoying being sex objects, they’re somehow liberated. This is absolute nonsense. You’re not liberated if you’re still defined as an object.

Miley is precisely that—a sex object—when she twerks around a fully dressed older man. Think about that image. It’s the same old story, just updated for the modern stage.

That old painting comes to mind—the one with the fully dressed men having a picnic with naked women. I think it was *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* by Manet. Something is clearly wrong with that picture.

Jacobsen: Rigid ranking, gender control, sanctioned violence, gods, metaphysics, philosophers, abortion, life after death—narratives, cultural logics. I suppose we should conclude by discussing any thoughts on conceptions of life after death within these frameworks.

Eisler: It’s punishment and reward. If you’re a good, obedient, God-fearing person, you get to go to heaven. And if you’re not—if you’re a sinner—you go to hell for eternal torture. This isn’t just a medieval idea; it’s baked into some modern religious beliefs of those who want to impose them on others. It’s domination through religion—first over those who believe it, and then over those on whom they wish to impose it.

The fact of the matter is, none of us has the cognitive equipment to know what happens after death or before birth.

Jacobsen: Any final thoughts before we go?

Eisler: I think the importance of the Four Cornerstones—story and language, especially—is enormous. I’m leaving language aside for now; we could do another discussion on that, though it’s pretty depressing. But the stories we’ve all been told, whether religious or secular, have to be examined and re-examined through the lens of the partnership–domination social scale.

Just think of those Four Cornerstones and how much attention they receive—whether it’s the Taliban, the current administration in the United States, Hitler’s Germany, or Stalin’s Soviet Union. There were no women at the top in the USSR. Women could be functionaries below, but in the Politburo? Nothing. And look how much attention is paid to gender—and how we’ve been conditioned to accept it as “just the way things are.”

Dominator religion reinforces this—the Lord, the King, the God commands it to be so. That’s a complex story to overcome, but some people do. I’ve even written about a man who could reasonably be called a fascist in his hatred of Jews, whom a Jewish rabbi and his wife befriended. They helped him—and he ended up converting to Judaism. People can change.

And we have to count on that. Neuroscience tells us that the first five years of life are critical, when our brains are forming in response to what we see and experience. But it also tells us we can change. Consciousness can shift in an instant—it really only takes a second.

My work has changed the consciousness of many people, including myself.

Jacobsen: The end.

Eisler: See you next week.

Partnership Studies 14: 'The Odyssey' Reviewed

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler examines Homer through her partnership versus domination lens, arguing *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* glorify the hero as killer and vilify the feminine. Eisler connects Homeric narratives to her four cornerstones—family and childhood, gender, economics, and care for Earth—insisting peace begins at home. She contrasts the blade with the chalice, symbolizing nurturing power and transformation. Penelope's subordination and the execution of enslaved women exemplify domination's logic. The interview invites reconstructive storytelling.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, we're here with Riane Eisler. We're going to be talking primarily about *The Odyssey*, following the faith-based conversation, language, and narratives. Why *The Odyssey*?

Riane Eisler: I was surprised, going back to *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, to find that Homer was the propagandist—the secular propagandist—for what I call the domination system. I had thought about the fact that *The Odyssey* is full of references to the older, more partnership-oriented system in which female figures and deities also played a significant role. But I didn't realize how *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are pure propaganda for the hero as a killer—the hero's journey centered on the hero as a killer.

National Geographic has prominently covered Mary—famously, a December 2015 cover story on how the Virgin Mary became “the world's most powerful woman,” and more recent historical features—Mary as the only female figure in a very strange pantheon where only the Father and the Son are divine, and she, the mother of God, is the only mortal figure. Maybe they will also share a new analysis of the Odyssey. It's in the air, this revisiting. It's both deconstruction and reconstruction.

Jacobsen: Do you find that this reinvention or re-presentation within a contemporary cultural milieu is almost like—metaphorically—an immune system reaction, the mythos defending itself from diminution?

Eisler: I don't think of it as the immune system, though I like that idea. The immune system of humanity is at risk because of the domination system. As I've said many times, we're not only globally interconnected by technologies of transportation and communication but also by technologies of destruction, such as nuclear bombs, and more slowly by climate change caused by technology guided by a domination system. We are facing an existential risk. You may be right that this revisiting is, in a sense, an immune system reacting to the contemporary regression to rigid domination systems, which idealize the hero as killer.

The reaction does consist of both deconstruction and reconstruction because we humans need stories—we live by stories. The stories we've inherited, whether secular or religious, are not only justifications of domination but also vilifications of the female. You see clues of that throughout *The Odyssey*. The four cornerstones are all there.

Jacobsen: What values do cultures use to define the “hero,” and why is the killer elevated within that set of values in *The Odyssey*?

Eisler: Domination systems are held together by fear and force—fear of pain, whether it’s fear of being fired by those on top or punished by caregivers or parents. It’s something taught very early. I always return to the four cornerstones that research identifies: family and childhood; gender; economics—because we don’t reward care, which is coded subordinate and “feminine” though it is central to the distinction between domination systems and partnership systems; care for people starting at birth; and care for Mother Earth.

Mother Earth—that’s another clue, isn’t it? And of course, there’s story and language: the fourth cornerstone of societies orienting to partnership or to domination. When we intervene in story and language, we take into account all four of these cornerstones, plus probably a fifth one, which I didn’t make a cornerstone because it’s implicit: fear and violence, pain or pleasure, holding the system together.

I wrote about this in *Sacred Pleasure*, which came out in 1995 with HarperCollins. That book prefigures much of my later thinking and writing.

Jacobsen: How are women as personae portrayed in *The Odyssey*? Some general characterizations—how is the female form represented and implicitly judged in *The Odyssey*? You also hinted at this earlier.

Eisler: One of the core components we haven’t recognized as linked to the domination system is how nearly all progressive social movements over the last 300 years have challenged the same thing, a tradition of domination—whether the Enlightenment, which questioned the so-called divinely ordained right of kings to rule; the feminist movement, which questioned the so-called divinely ordained right of men to rule over women and children in their homes; the anti-racism movement, beginning with abolitionism; the environmental movement, challenging the so-called divinely ordained right of man to dominate nature, or the peace movement.

If you look at war rather than peace, the assumption is that peace is not just an interval between wars. Peace begins at home. That connects the dots between the first cornerstone—family and childhood—and warfare. People who are raised in domineering households, in highly punitive environments, learn those models of power early on.

Research shows that people raised in domination households—highly punitive environments—are much more likely to accept and support wars. But the point you’re making is about the female form, and I want to emphasize this, how integral the subordination of women and rigid gender stereotypes are to all four cornerstones.

We’ve long assigned fixed roles to the male and female forms and ranked the male over the female, with no one in between, even though there have always been people in between. This ranking is central to all four cornerstones. We have a gendered system of values in economics: there’s always money for weapons, for wars, for the hero as killer—but somehow never enough

for feeding, nurturing, and caring for children. It's a very irrational system, what I call "reality stood on its head."

In reimagining *The Odyssey*, the female forms are either vilified—the Sirens devour men; Scylla and Charybdis are monsters—or sexualized, reduced to sexual objects for the male hero. Yet within *The Odyssey*, figures like Circe and Calypso remain powerful female archetypes. That power is a remnant of earlier, partnership-oriented traditions. But in the Homeric framework, these figures are vilified, and even Penelope—though still powerful in her way—is subordinated. Odysseus, the hero as killer, must be her consort to gain legitimacy, but she herself is portrayed as obedient and constrained.

Even her son, Telemachus, can tell her to be silent—an astonishing reflection of the patriarchal norms of the time. Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope, is ordered by Odysseus to execute the enslaved women after they clean up the carnage left by his slaughter of the suitors. Odysseus is a killer—that's his defining trait—and that legacy of violence has persisted into our modern epics, our blockbuster films where the hero kills the villain.

The villain isn't always female today, but in *The Odyssey*, the villains are often female, including the enslaved women. There's no trial, no notion of justice or human rights—only the rule that might makes right.

Jacobsen: If the phrase could summarize the dominator model in that kind of literature, "might makes right," what would be the equivalent summary statement for a partnership model?

Eisler: It's *The Chalice and the Blade*—two symbols, both powerful. The blade represents domination, power over others, and it has become embedded in our language and institutions. The chalice, by contrast, symbolizes partnership, the power to nurture, to sustain, to create rather than destroy.

It's a sign of movement toward partnership thinking to reject that older idea of power as domination. Ultimately, in the domination system, power means the power to take life—the hero as killer. The chalice represents a very different power: the power to nurture life. Women's bodies, for example, produce milk—literally sustaining life.

This creates what I call a biological obstacle to domination. So, in the mythology of the domination system, women and female archetypes must be controlled or diminished. The Jungian archetypes are steeped in this framework. The *animus*—the masculine principle—has agency, while the *anima*—the feminine—is either man's inspiration or his temptation and ruin.

We've been indoctrinated from birth into this domination mythology. That's not to say Jung didn't make valuable contributions. His concept of the *shadow* is an important one, and we're still in a transitional period where these frameworks coexist.

Would a society oriented more toward partnership still require such archetypes? A society where care work is economically rewarded, and children aren't raised in fear or physical pain? What's clear is that our task now is to show that there's a better alternative—and that alternative is partnership, a system of mutuality rather than of in-group versus out-group.

Jacobsen: As a side note, historically, how has the chalice been used—either in ritual or mythology? Since we’re talking about old myths, it seems appropriate to explore that. The blade’s symbolism is obvious, but the chalice’s story seems more elusive.

Eisler: I’m not an expert on the mythology of the Holy Grail, which of course is the chalice, but obviously it’s been co-opted into later stories. In the Arthurian legends, for example, the hero encounters the Grail and transforms. Through contact with the Grail, he gains the capacity for empathy, which is a profoundly human trait.

That story is one of the few that makes explicit the possibility of transformation. We are a remarkably flexible species; we can change. We can recapture our capacity for empathy. But even in that story, the empathy is directed toward a king, a superior within a rigid social hierarchy—which is rarely noted.

Jacobsen: *The Odyssey*—what are some of your original findings in reframing it?

Eisler: I think, first of all, it’s essential to recognize the clues to an earlier time. All of Odysseus’s major adversaries are female monsters—the vilification of the feminine as a narrative device.

The vilification of the female—of woman—is everywhere. Penelope remains an influential figure, so the clues are still there. The hero is the killer; he slays monsters, exploits Calypso and Circe sexually, and ultimately gains his power through Penelope, who becomes his instrument for authority and rulership.

There are so many signs of domination in *The Odyssey*. Take the double standard surrounding Odysseus’s infidelities with Circe and Calypso. His sexual adventures are treated as natural and unremarkable—of course, he does that. Meanwhile, poor Penelope must remain chaste, endlessly weaving and fending off the suitors.

Then there’s the execution of the enslaved women, killed supposedly for having relations with the suitors. Were they forced? Did they even have a choice? It doesn’t matter to the narrative; they’re vilified and slaughtered without question. The scene is a chilling emblem of absolute power and moral hypocrisy.

Jacobsen: That raises the question—how would one rewrite *The Odyssey*? If we’re engaging in both deconstruction and reconstruction, what would *The Odyssey* look like if it were not only the hero’s journey but the journey of both hero and heroine?

Eisler: We’ve never really had the heroine’s journey as a central theme of mythology.

Jacobsen: In contemporary media—which I don’t watch much of—the heroines often invert the male model. They become violent, aggressive, adopting the same dominator values in a So, basically, the female form becomes the man-killer hero, and what’s changed is the shape, not the content.

Eisler: Absolutely. She's still conditioned to accept that as the "normal" or "natural" order. It reminds me of what Gandhi said: we must not mistake the habitual for the natural norm. That observation is profoundly relevant.

Because when the heroine imitates the hero, nothing changes—it's still the same story. It still glorifies killing. That's NOT reconstruction; it's co-option!

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 15: Riane Eisler on Politics: Partnership Leadership vs. Domination

In this interview with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler contrasts domination leaders—hierarchical, punitive, spectacle-driven—with partnership leadership that centers care, gender equity, childhood, and Earth. Rapid technological change meets trauma, enabling authoritarian regression from Afghanistan and Iran to parts of the United States. Economics still mislabels care as “reproductive” work; universities remain top-down, even as women advance in law, medicine, and science. Marx missed gender’s central role; dictatorships proved domination’s logic. Narrative reform, education, and evidence from prehistory support swift shifts. Ireland’s recent changes illuminate society’s recovering immune response and resilience.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When it comes to politics, how does a politician act under a domination style of leadership versus a partnership style? And as a side question, can people “fake it till they make it” into either model? Because both seem emotionally rewarding: power feels good, but so does community.

Riane Eisler: We’re living through a period of transition from domination toward partnership. There’s a strong global movement in that direction—but it’s also being countered by a robust regression, often expressed through religious mythologies. You can see this in Afghanistan, Iran, and even in parts of the United States, Hungary, and other nations.

I have to digress briefly because this ties into change itself. We’re in an age of immense technological transformation—artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and other scientific breakthroughs are reshaping our world. But change is tough for people who have been deeply traumatized by the domination system, often beginning within their families. Poverty is traumatizing, too. So, for many, genuine transformation feels nearly impossible. They cling to the old norms.

And those who push us backward have a tremendous advantage, because our collective consciousness is fragmented. We divide ourselves by inherited categories—right and left, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern, capitalist and socialist. These divisions distract us from the real underlying issue.

None of these categories is holistic. None truly accounts for the fundamental components of a social system—mainly family and childhood, or gender relations. These areas are either marginalized or, in domination-oriented societies, treated as unquestionable hierarchies.

So yes, it’s a difficult time. But what’s at stake is nothing less than our survival.

We must change our categories and our thinking. As Einstein said, it’s madness to believe we can solve our problems with the same consciousness, the same vocabulary, and the same worldview that created them.

This fragmentation of consciousness keeps the old systems in place—the illusion that the same mindset can solve the problems it created. We have to shift toward a more holistic way of

viewing society, one that truly includes gender, childhood, and family, and recognizes their foundational importance. So a whole-systems analysis is essential.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How do we do this?

Riane Eisler: Take economics, for example. Both Adam Smith and Karl Marx took the most basic human work -- caring for people and caring for our natural environment—the sources of life itself, and classified this vital work as “reproductive” rather than “productive” labour. So they devalued it. And this devaluation is perpetuated by our measurement of “productivity” like GDP and GNP, where caring for people outside the market is not included, and neither is caring for nature, so that a tree is not included until it is dead, a log, that can be bought and sold in the market. This makes no sense, and neither does including only the rebuilding after a natural disaster, like a storm, but considering the damage to people and nature just “externalities” and therefore not to be counted in these economic measures!

And of course, there’s story and language—because we all live by story. If we fail to adapt those, we’re lost.

Once you begin to see “reality”—including politics, mythology, and culture—through the whole-systems lens of the partnership-domination social scale or continuum, everything looks different. We see how our epics idealize and celebrate the hero as a killer. The *Odyssey*, the hero’s journey, and even modern entertainment are all variations of the same domination narrative. Today’s blockbusters are the digital descendants of the Roman circuses—spectacles of adrenaline and violence that distract rather than enlighten.

We’re living in an era when truth itself is under siege. Facts, such as those demonstrating climate change, are dismissed or distorted.

However, science, though indispensable, is not immune to bias. Scientists are human; they carry cultural assumptions like anyone else. I often think of Galileo—threatened by the scientific establishment of his time because his observations challenged entrenched dogma. Or the old scientific prejudice that women were merely containers for male genetic material, the belief that heredity passed “solely through men.” These are striking examples of gendered distortion disguised as science.

Jacobsen: That reminds me of Kurt Vonnegut. I recall a story where he was on stage with another humanist writer who made a cutting remark, and he replied with equal wit—something like, “Well, women can’t do science. They discovered that at Harvard,” referencing Lawrence Summers’s infamous comment. It was sardonic, of course, pointing out how absurdly chauvinist that notion was.

Eisler: And what we’re seeing now, ironically, contradicts those old biases. In many professional fields—law, medicine, academia—women are the majority of new entrants. Most law school classes today are primarily female. The same trend is emerging in medicine, especially among general practitioners.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of practical realities catching up. But the old structures persist—universities, for example, still mirror the hierarchies of religious institutions, built on centuries of domination.

Universities are still very top-down and fragmented, despite students' growing demand for multidisciplinary teaching. By the way, the Center for Partnership System's new course materials for teaching global history using the partnership-domination social scale are almost ready for release.

At the University of Arkansas, there's a faculty member who teaches global history and discovered my work. He's been using it because it integrates gender as a key analytical lens—something still treated as taboo in much of academia. It's astonishing how hard it remains to address gender seriously.

Women can enter science, as Jane Goodall did, but they're still a minority. More women are now receiving Nobel Prizes, which is encouraging and long overdue. But it's worth remembering that until the early twentieth century, women were barred from most universities—Harvard, for instance. In Canada, many women couldn't even hold academic positions or obtain full professional visas until the 1970s.

So, real progress, but within only about a century.

Even thinkers like Marx, who called it “the woman question,” dismissed it as secondary. He couldn't see that gender roles and relations are a central organizing principle—shaping families, economies, and every social institution. He was wrong about that.

When you talk to Marxists today, many still try to reconcile that gap in his thinking. Marx himself was a complex figure—a mix of domination and partnership impulses. In his personal life, he was very much the dominator. In his political theory, he believed in the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which is inherently a domination model. And history proved it: the USSR became a full-blown domination system.

Yet to his credit, he did imagine that dictatorship as temporary—a stage toward something more egalitarian. But he remained a man of his time, bound by the norms that said women didn't count and “women's work” didn't matter.

Meanwhile, men today face their own crisis. They're flooded with propaganda urging them to reclaim dominance. Many boys and young men mistake that for strength, forgetting they're simply part of a larger hierarchy of domination. If someone higher up—say, a ruler like Putin—wants more territory, those same young men are expected to give their lives for his ambitions.

Jacobsen: So we're back to politics.

Eisler: Yes, we're back to politics, which is still studied separately, although domination scales up from the household to the nation.

The personal is political, and the political is personal. That's what partnership thinking helps us finally see.

It's all interconnected. Someone like Putin, for example, if we examined his childhood, I'm certain we'd find deep trauma. The same applies to many leaders. Even in the United States, both the president and vice president have spoken publicly about the impact of their early experiences. So yes, we face an enormous challenge.

But returning to your question, can politicians truly transform or express that change? If they don't, we're in trouble.

But if they do, they can also face backlash, because much of the electorate still sees no alternative to domination. And for those deeply tied to authoritarian movements, like the MAGA faction in the U.S., there's virtually no willingness to reconsider. It's a difficult moment in history.

Yet I have faith in human creativity and in our instinct for survival.

That brings us back to something you mentioned earlier—the *re-mything* impulse, as I call it, the urge to recover what's been lost or hidden. It's like a cultural immune system. Deconstruction and reconstruction of stories are part of this process.

But what we must reconstruct is nothing less than what society accepts as “normal” and “natural.”

That requires revisiting the evidence from prehistory, archeology, the study of myths, DNA studies, all of which show that for most of human history societies were more partnership-oriented than domination-based—and some still are today.

Change is possible, and it can happen swiftly. Look at Ireland: it has become far more partnership-oriented in just a few decades.

Jacobsen: Riane, thank you for your time.

Partnership Studies 16: Women's Leadership, Partnership Power, and Caring Economies

In this wide-ranging conversation, Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with Eisler about shifting from domination to partnership in politics, economics, and everyday life. Eisler explains that partnership leadership is not replacing men with women but empowering enlightened women and men to share "power to" and "power with," grounded in care. She highlights Nordic nations, Ireland, and Canada as imperfect yet tangible examples of caring policy in action. Drawing on her refugee experience and global movements, Eisler argues that women's organizing and expanded caring economies are essential if humanity is to move beyond regression and build sustainable, just societies.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The partnership studies model of leadership is more subtle than people often stereotype it as in feminism and women's leadership, because people tend to think in opposites. You point out repeatedly that the opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy; it is partnership. When you are looking at women's leadership, you are looking at women's equality and at a more dynamic, integrated relationship in leadership with the men who are here now or will be in the future. It seems a more realistic and balanced view. It is less discussed because its integration points are not brought to the fore as much. Can you flesh that out in terms of what women's leadership looks like?

Riane Eisler: There has been a big misunderstanding. Getting more women into leadership is not about replacing men. We are talking about enlightened men and women working together in a new model of leadership—a partnership leadership model—where decisions and power differ from those we have inherited, which come from the domination model—power over. This is a model grounded in a different kind of power, a power that we all have, women and men, which is power to, our creative power, which is enormous. Everything we have, physical objects, is a human creation, and so are cultures, norms, and values. We can change, and we have changed. This model of leadership takes that into account. It is not only power to, but also power with. There are hierarchies in this model, but they are hierarchies of actualization rather than hierarchies of domination.

Power is therefore conceptualized differently. This model also recognizes—although this is cramming a great deal into one answer, and we can take it apart as we go—our interconnection at this level of technology, not only through communication and transportation, but through technologies of destruction like nuclear weapons and, more slowly, climate change. It also recognizes a principle attributed to Albert Einstein: that we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

Jacobsen: How can women misstep when they enter that form of leadership? This is a new, experimental moment in contemporary history. How have women, when they have been in leadership, made mistakes similar to men when they have adopted a dominator persona?

Eisler: This is why my first answer focused on a different kind of leadership. There have been women who have used the same model of leadership—Margaret Thatcher, Catherine the Great

(Catherine II of Russia)—because they stepped into leadership as defined by the old domination system. That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about a new, different model of leadership.

Jacobsen: How do we separate the wheat from the chaff? How do we distinguish men who are genuinely more enlightened—who have taken on that change of mind—from those who are essentially performing politically for votes?

Eisler: I think you know the answer to that. It is a change in consciousness, an understanding that we cannot continue with this in-group-versus-out-group leadership and the violence it entails. That violence is dangerous. It poses an existential threat to our survival as a species, not only quickly through nuclear weapons or biological warfare, but more slowly—yet surely—through the exploitation of nature, which is now rebelling against us.

Jacobsen: You have mentioned the Nordic nations as being pretty good at this. What parts did they implement earliest that showed they were moving effectively toward partnership?

Eisler: They implemented caring policies, meaning caring for ourselves, for each other, and for our life-support systems. They often call themselves caring societies, and they are not socialist states. That is a big misunderstanding. They have healthy market economies precisely because they also have caring policies—paid parental leave, which is publicly financed; affordable, well-compensated child care; and strong social supports. They are way ahead of the United States—which is moving backward at the moment—including in caring for our natural environment. They lead in the adoption of new and non-polluting forms of energy. And they are not alone.

Ireland, for example, has moved very quickly toward the partnership end of the partnership–domination social scale. Canada, despite its frequent shifts in political leadership, is still ahead of the United States in efforts to phase out fossil fuels. We have to do this.

Caring for children and the household—the very work that both Marx and Adam Smith relegated to women to do for free in male-controlled households—is coming more and more to the fore in public understanding. And as AI advances, this is one of the few areas where human beings will continue to be essential: caring activities. I do not mean only health care or child care. I mean an entire expansion of care, including policies like a guaranteed annual income. Because what are people going to do as automation accelerates? Education for caring—caring for self, for others, and for our Mother Earth—is crucial.

There is a connection between women's leadership and women's historical exclusion from leadership, which is part of our heritage from more authoritarian, violent times. We certainly do not want to return to those times. Nor do we want to lose sight of the long periods in human history when societies were more oriented toward partnership than toward domination. The evidence for that is clear.

We have to be very creative now. Women's creativity has been profoundly devalued. Being a parent is an innovative enterprise. Being a mother is lauded rhetorically, but not rewarded materially. In fact, it is often punished.

Jacobsen: I love the way you put that. That is very succinct. We laud it, but we do not reward it. Different cultural contexts may or may not take that road—or set of roads. In other regions of the world, paths differ from the Nordic or Northern and Western European trajectories. If you look at African states, East Asian states, Eurasian regions, and Latin America, what path would be likely for them if they were to move more in that direction regionally?

Eisler: I grew up in Latin America as a refugee from the Holocaust. My parents were able to purchase an entry permit to Cuba, and I grew up in the industrial slums of Havana. Things are changing slowly in Latin America, thanks, frankly, to the leadership and organization of women. The old saying is "Don't agonize—organize." And that does not only mean protesting. We are in a time of transition in which many movements are challenging domination: challenging the rule of kings, challenging the authority of men over women and children. All of these movements challenge domination. The same is true for challenging our dominion over Mother Earth, the peace movement, the movements against racism, and the movements for economic and political justice.

The current regression is a reaction to these challenges. That is what we must understand. Our task is to show that there is a better alternative. And women are organizing worldwide. We are in a time of transition, and we do not know which way the pendulum will go, but it has to move toward partnership if we are to survive and thrive. That is the issue.

Women are slowly entering the current economy as entrepreneurs, which they have to do. But our task—to use a woman's metaphor—is not only to get a bigger slice of the existing economic pie, but to bake a better pie.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 17: Partnership Models, Human Futures, and Cultural Transformation

In this wide-ranging conversation with Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Eisler discusses the core differences between domination and partnership models and why fragmented worldviews hinder our understanding of social systems. She explains how her framework of relational dynamics reveals overlooked drivers of culture, from childhood environments to gender norms. Drawing on archaeology, neuroscience, and history, Eisler highlights evidence for earlier egalitarian societies and emphasizes the need for new stories that celebrate cooperative human potential. They explore how people shift toward partnership values, the cognitive barriers they face, and why cultural narratives must evolve to prevent humanity from repeating destructive patterns.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Between a domination and a partnership model, something that comes to mind is how we acquire knowledge, how we integrate knowledge, and how we use knowledge. What is the big difference between partnership and domination models—knowledge acquisition, attainment, and use?

Riane Eisler: The difference between the conventional way we're used to thinking, feeling, and acting—which is very choppy and fragmented—and the partnership-domination social scale is that this scale is based on a whole-systems analysis. And it's based on connecting the dots. If you only look at part of a system, you don't see the whole system. So I had to introduce and develop my own method of analysis, which I called the study of relational dynamics. This methodology focuses on relationships: What kinds of relationships does a particular social system support or inhibit? And, second, what is the relationship between the major components of social systems that mutually support each other? That led me to the understanding that our old social categories fragment our consciousness. East–West and North–South focus on geography. Capitalist–Socialist focuses on economics. Left–Right focuses on politics. There have been regressive, repressive, awful societies in every one of these categories. And all of them either marginalize the majority of humanity—women and children—or, as in some religious ideologies, claim that this is how God and nature intended it to be: rigid gender stereotypes and the ranking of male and masculine over female and feminine.

We've all grown up with this. This is not a question of men against women or women against men. It is certainly not a question of shaming or blaming. It is a question of taking the scales off our eyes and looking at the whole system. And yes, looking at relationships.

We are now in a period of global regression to domination, which is a reaction—I cannot emphasize this enough—to movements during a period of massive disequilibrium, as the Industrial Revolution, beginning in the late eighteenth century, went into high gear over the following centuries. Movement after movement, organized social movements, all challenged the same thing: domination. But it requires a whole-systems view to understand this. The movement against the rule of kings over their subjects, the rule of men over women and children, the rule of a "superior race" over "inferior races," and, ultimately, the environmental movement challenging

human dominion over nature—over everything that moves on this Earth—are all connected. We're not used to connecting the dots.

As for knowledge acquisition, in my book *Tomorrow's Children*, I emphasize repeatedly what I recommend as a partnership education for the twenty-first century, both formal and informal. That means weaning us from violent entertainment. It is better than the Roman circus in its audiovisual sophistication, but it accomplishes the same thing. It normalizes violence, just as violence is normalized by violence in the family—what I call it, rather than "domestic violence," which gets marginalized immediately. The victims of this violence are mostly women and children, some men, and many boys—many, many boys. That normalizes violence.

As for knowledge integration, conventional analyses of societies have left out formative dots, actually huge lacunae: childhood, family, and gender. How these translate into economics, worldview, stories, and language remains invisible to us because we have excluded them. And we do not recognize that a partnership alternative exists, even though so much evidence is coming at us in bits and pieces—again, very fragmented. Archaeologically, for example, Chinese archaeologists recently found a prehistoric society that was matrilineal and matrilocal, dispelling the caveman cartoon of a man holding a weapon in one hand and dragging a woman by the hair with the other. You would think we would connect the dots, but we rarely do.

Jacobsen: Blinding lacunae—our inability to see that these partnership models are available. What was the reason this Chinese discovery matters?

Eisler: The Chinese discovery is just one in a whole series of findings that arrive in fragments. Archaeological evidence shows, for example, that the handprints in Paleolithic caves were not primarily made by men but by women; the anatomical ratios of finger lengths differ reliably between male and female hands, and the prints match female patterns. Catalhoyuk was peaceful, gender-balanced, and more equitable for roughly a thousand years. We know these things. The data are there. But we do not connect the dots.

What does this mean for our species, for humanity? For thousands of years—as shown in *Nurturing Our Humanity*, which I co-authored with Douglas Fry, an anthropologist specializing in peace studies—we lived as gatherers and hunters. We have learned to reverse the phrase, putting hunting first, when actually most of our calories came from gathering, a sphere in which women played a significant role. We also now know that women, including pregnant women, hunted as well. Yet the evidence arrives in such scattered pieces that you must be a generalist to synthesize it—and you need a conceptual frame. That frame is the partnership–domination social scale.

Jacobsen: What do you think is the easiest element for people to integrate when leaning toward the partnership model, and what tends to be the hardest cognitive gap?

Eisler: It is tough for us to give up our stories, both religious and secular, even though we have inherited narratives that idealize the hero as a killer. Consider *The Odyssey*: Odysseus still depends on a woman, Penelope, to secure his power and rulership, and the text features influential female figures that offer clues to an earlier cultural layer. Yet his adversaries—Sirens,

Charybdis—are portrayed as monstrous females whom he must defeat or outsmart. He uses Calypso and Circe as sexual conveniences. The double standard is already firmly in place. Penelope is idealized for weaving and unweaving her tapestry to fend off suitors, while he freely exploits other women. It is an ethical mess, but we have learned to idealize these stories. We blame Eve or Pandora for humanity's ills.

Jacobsen: What is your favourite story that most aligns with the partnership model?

Eisler: We are trying to create partnership stories—imagining what such narratives would look like. As we have discussed many times, the alternative to patriarchy is not matriarchy. That is simply the other side of the same coin of domination. The alternative is partnership.

We want enlightened men and women to take leadership. That is the new hero-and-heroine journey. But we face many obstacles.

Still, societies have changed before. Five to ten thousand years ago—which is a drop in the evolutionary bucket—our cultural systems shifted dramatically. And now, with nuclear weapons and climate change, we must move toward partnership quickly. But it will require tremendous effort and tremendous creativity—or else a terrible disaster will force the change.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 18: Authoritarianism, Domination Systems, and Partnership

Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with cultural historian Riane Eisler about authoritarianism as a "domination system" rooted in rigid gender hierarchies, family violence, and fear. Eisler contrasts this with partnership-based models that nurture empathy, equity, and care from early childhood. Drawing on neuroscience and cross-cultural research, she argues that human nature is flexible and that social movements for workers' rights, gender equality, and environmental protection reveal our deep drive for cooperation. She calls for rethinking religion, economics, and AI design to move beyond inherited domination narratives toward more just, sustainable, and life-affirming societies. Eisler frames this as an urgent evolutionary turning point.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How do you characterize authoritarianism broadly, and how do you describe it with respect to how they see human nature?

Riane Eisler: Well, let me start by saying that what I call the domination model is authoritarianism. And it's a top-down model, man over man, man over woman, man over nature, race over race. It's an in-group versus outgroup model, and at the top sits a strongman, usually, like Stalin or Hitler in modern times.

The problem is that we have all inherited that model. We've inherited it in the family, which is supposed to be "male headed," with the father being authoritarian, hopefully a benevolent one. As an attorney, for example, I knew that the English common law and much of our heritage was that: the husband and the wife are one, and the one is the husband. So, right there, you've got the male head of household and basically the invisibility of wives, which has been most women throughout recorded or domination history.

That goes to your second question: is the domination system a model for a king or a strong man of any stripe. In my first book drawing on my multidisciplinary, cross-cultural, transhistorical research, *The Chalice and the Blade*, I point out that totalitarian regimes are nothing more than authoritarian regimes using modern technology. And we're seeing it right now in the regression that we're living through, which is, of course, in reaction to all the organized movements I write about.

I can't emphasize that enough, all these movements challenge the same thing: domination, whether it's the king's right to rule, whether it's the men's right to rule over women and children, whether it's the so-called superior race over an inferior race, all the way to the environmental movement challenging man's dominion over everything that moves on this earth, over nature. These movements came out of human nature, contradicting the old story of human nature, that we're bad, we're selfish, because every one of them is really a movement that doesn't want a domination system.

Jacobsen: Does this show that human nature is fundamentally quite flexible?

Eisler: My latest book, *Nurturing Our Humanity*, published by Oxford University Press in 2019, draws heavily from what we know today from neuroscience, which is what psychology, of

course, has been saying all along, we are a very flexible species. The nature-versus-nurture conflict is a distraction, because human nature is quite malleable, quite flexible – and a lot depends on what children observe or experience in their early years before our brains are fully formed.

So, nurture really shapes us, and that includes, of course, what the culture supports, because families don't arise in a vacuum; they're part of a culture or subculture. It is sad that so many people really believe that fear is the motivation that keeps humans from being selfish, when the people who worked on all the movements I just mentioned weren't driven by fear; they were driven by hope for something better.

Jacobsen: What do you make of the individuals who show that drive for a hope for something better when they're in the midst of highly authoritarian structures?

Eisler: What I make of them is that it is really human nature coming to the fore, that all things being equal, and these are all movements to make them more equitable, more peaceful, less fear, whether it was the movement to cut hours at work, which we achieved, whether it's the movement against child labor, these were all movements that were based on knowledge and a feeling that we can do better. A big part of my calling has been to show that for most of our history, including millennia of our prehistory, we oriented more to the partnership side of the partnership domination social scale, and that only five to ten thousand years ago, which, as I always point out, is a drop in the evolutionary bucket, we shifted. But that's what we've inherited.

We've inherited families that believe women are inferior to men, and that “women’s work” is also inferior. This is not a question of women against men or men against women. Men are part of a hierarchy of men, and they are just as afraid in domination systems: of losing their job and even of dying in battle because some guy on top, like Putin, wants more real estate.

In domination systems femininity and masculinity are very rigid, very stereotyped.

And why is gender such an essential part of this authoritarian system? Why did Hitler emphasize it so much? Why did Stalin emphasize it so much? Why does Trump emphasize it so much? Why does Putin or Orbach emphasize it? Why do the Taliban emphasize gender? Why does fundamentalist Iran?

The reason, which we have not been taught, is that the ranking of male and “masculinity” over female and “femininity” is a model for equating difference, beginning with the difference in form between the female and male forms. And once we learn that, which children do in domination oriented families, one can apply this ranking of gender stereotypes to all other differences, whether racial or ethnic. You always blame outgroups, as in the stories we've inherited, blaming Eve, the first woman, for all of humanity's ills. We've inherited these in no less than our sacred scriptures.

This is why one of the projects I so wish that we could do soon, because it's so essential, is for representatives of all the major religions to get together and sort the grain from the chaff. And the

grain consists of the core teachings, which are “feminine” teachings, aren't they? Of caring, which is coded feminine. Of nonviolence, which is, again, coded not manly, feminine.

These teachings are like, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love teachings.

Love is a tremendous force in the history of our species. You know, Darwin himself said that in his book on human evolution. He said in his *Descent of Man* when you come to what I will now talk about, human evolution, factors such as moral sensitivity, love, and some of the core religious teachings we have preserved in our religions, are much more important than what is written in Origin of Species. And of course we have been taught to associate love with the “inferior” feminine. In fact, the vilification of women is part of the chaff, which is all of the dominator stuff that was added to our scriptures to maintain domination or authoritarian systems.

So let's talk about family, which we've been taught not to pay much attention to. The Center for Partnership Systems just had a summit, Peace Begins at Home—showing how violence in families, so-called domestic violence, which I want to change to family violence, ripples out when we're adults, not only in replicating that violence in families, but in normalizing violence, social violence, including war.

So, coming back to your question, how did the people who wanted something better than what we've inherited, how did they come to that?

I think it's human nature, this wanting something that is not based on fear, because authoritarianism maintains itself through fear of pain, through fear of violence.

Jacobsen: What about psychological or emotional terror in these systems? And also, what about psychological and emotional terror and violence?

Eisler: Psychological and emotional terror is a big part of the maintenance of domination systems, because we all have psyches, children are very dependent and susceptible, and children are told, mind you, that it's their fault, their fault, so they have to be punished, emotionally and/or physically. So denial starts in dominant families. You don't start denial with climate change denial or COVID-19 denial or election result denial.

No, you start with denial that those who are your caregivers, on whom you depend for life, for food, for shelter, are causing you pain. That's where it starts. So, we have to pay attention to our cultural environments -- and families are where most children learn to be in denial or to accept authoritarianism and violence as normal. Yet some of these very children grow up to question that all of this fear and all of this injustice is necessary.

And that gives me hope.

Jacobsen: If there's one structural change that is made by people living in authoritarian or domination-based societies, what is it that sort of starts the shift to a more partnership-oriented model?

Eisler: I have, as you know, found through research that there are four cornerstones of either domination-oriented or partnership-oriented societies. And that it starts with childhood and

family. And we haven't paid enough attention to that first cornerstone of either domination or partnership oriented societies.

Because of our formal and informal education, we have also been taught to marginalize or just ignore how gender roles and relationships are structured. And yes, that is the second cornerstone. And all of these four cornerstones are interconnected, by the way. But the very rigid gender stereotypes are necessary in domination systems for ranking not only male but also masculine over female and feminine. But to this day people aren't taught about gender being so important. They're either taught that it's a matter of women against men or men against women, as I said.

Actually research shows that gender is a fundamental principle in the organization of families, of societies, of economics – which is the third cornerstone, and of society at large. And they're all interconnected.

And, of course, the fourth cornerstone is story and language. I told you that we're working to both deconstruct and reconstruct *The Odyssey*, which is a secular epic like so much of the celluloid epics that get huge audiences because they do get our adrenaline flowing. But they also reinforce masculinity as defined in domination systems. And as you pointed out, whether it's a woman who is embodying this violence it's the same thing. You're still idealizing the hero or the heroine as a killer. And you're normalizing violence.

Jacobsen: How does this affect men? How does it affect women? And then, how do people who don't fit those categories get sidelined in a society? It follows the outcomes of those deemed not to fit the conception of human nature.

Eisler: That's why I always talk about anybody in between, because, as far as I can tell, there have always been shamans who were what we call gay or lesbian today. They have always... but how that is treated depends on the culture.

Now, we make a lot of the Athenian society, but what they approved of was pedophilia. It had to be an older man with a young man. That is not what we're talking about. That's called co-option. Where you use an idea and then pervert it so that the young man plays the role of the woman, who is so despised because Athenians really did despise women, not all of them, of course, but that was the norm. There is a book by a classicist, Eva Kuhls, called *The Reign of the Phallus*.

Excellent book, and it's cited in my book, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body*. I have a whole chapter on it, actually called *The Reign of the Phallus*, dispelling some of the crazy ideas and idealizations of Athenian society. For one thing, their fabled democracy was only for propertied men: a tiny percentage of the Athenian population. It wasn't for slaves of both sexes or for any women, whether they were “free” or enslaved people -- and really the vast majority of “free” women were enslaved people.

It was a very male-centered, domination-centered society, trying again to have something a little better. Still, it really wasn't better for most of the population.

And today we are questioning. Those of us who want something more equitable, more peaceful, more sustainable than the domination system, which we have inherited. We realize that we have

to understand that the framers of our constitution were slaveholders and that no women were included in the Bill of Rights, or any part of the Constitution.

We're questioning the domination norms about men who are attracted to men, women who are attracted to women, lesbians and gays, And some realize that there have also always been people who are trans. But that's part of the denial, that all that is abnormal, that it never existed. After all, it's part of our scriptures. That's another reason why the project to sort the chaff from the grain and expose the chaff, which is being used against us every day, is so urgent.

Jacobsen: It's so easy to lose sight of the flexibility of our human nature. So we begin to see things as such rigid categories. Is the reiteration of these narratives just that robust?

Eisler: Nature has polarities, but they're gradual. There's hot, and there's cold. There's light, and there's dark. And that's why I talk about the partnership–domination scale. But these very rigid definitions of woman and of man are part of the rigidity, of the fear and violence-based domination system.

And we have inherited that. We are fighting one another. Think of the argument between capitalism and socialism. It's a distraction, because both Smith and Marx said that the three life-sustaining sectors – the natural, community volunteer, and household economics sectors are outside of what is properly economics – which is crazy, absolutely wild.

But Smith and Marx were creatures of their time. The work of caring for people was to be done for free by a woman in a male-dominated household. There's nothing about caring for nature in what they wrote. Nature was there to be exploited. And now we're coming to what is an evolutionary dead end guided by these misguided theories.

We are at a point in our technological revolution where the domination system is not sustainable at this level of technology. We must use technologies to help us build a more peaceful, equitable and sustainable world.

And that goes for AI as well. Some people who are working with AI are beginning to realize that if AI is programmed for domination, we have every reason to fear it. But if AI is programmed for partnership, it can be our helper, our friend.

So that choice is right there.

Jacobsen: Riane, thank you for your time today.

Partnership Studies 19: Mutual Respect, Caring Economics, and Partnership Societies

In this interview, Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with Riane Eisler about how partnership societies cultivate respect as care rather than fear. Eisler argues that domination systems code caring as “feminine” and confuse respect with intimidation, producing in-group versus out-group ethics. Drawing on examples from the Teduray and contemporary Nordic policy, she links family dynamics to economics, proposing “caring economics” that values life-sustaining work across nature, households, communities, and markets. Jacobsen connects this to expanding the moral circle; Eisler responds that interconnection—technological, ecological, and even physical—makes caring respect essential in a high-technology era.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Hello Riane, thank you very much for joining me again. When we talk about Partnership Studies, there is an essential mutuality in partnerships at all scales of how we are defining this. A key facet is mutual respect. I do not think it is in any naïve way, where there are different types of respect: earned and unearned. One type is that you are a person who deserves basic respect. Another type is that you have done something for the community, so you have earned its respect. In a partnership studies model, how are you differentiating types of respect, and what is the importance of this?

Riane Eisler: I will start with how we have been socialized. We have been socialized to confuse respect and fear. We are talking about deconstructing what we have been taught and reconstructing as well. We certainly do not want to go back to any so-called “good old days.” Still, we know that for millennia of our cultural evolution, there were societies that oriented more toward the partnership side of the partnership–domination social scale. In these societies, respect was very important, and it was defined in a caring way.

When *The Chalice and the Blade* first came out, I received a phone call from Stuart Schlegel, an anthropologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is deceased now. He said he had done his research among an isolated tribe in the Philippines, the Teduray (or Tiruray). He used to call them radically egalitarian, but after reading *The Chalice and the Blade*, he realized they were partnership societies. They spoke of not wanting to hurt someone, of not wanting anyone to feel disrespected. It was a very caring way of expressing respect.

I do not know whether they still exist. These were isolated societies, the Teduray, or Tiruray—they went by both names. I always think of them because the term “respect” in families, for example, is so often associated with fear in the domination system, and confused with fear. That is the first point: the deconstruction and, at the same time, the reconstruction. Care is a very important part of respect, as I have learned from Indigenous societies like the Teduray or Tiruray, as well as from industrialized societies that have moved toward partnership. Our contemporary, highly technologically developed societies that have moved more toward partnership include the Nordic nations and Ireland, which have moved toward partnership very quickly.

Jacobsen: There is a contemporary ethical conversation about expanding the moral circle. The metaphor is of human beings placing themselves—their individual ego—at the center, then

expanding that circle outward to include more people, other species, and so on. Does an increasing sense of care expand that moral circle, at least within the dimension of respect, as well? Is this building into that contemporary discussion—or rather, is the contemporary discussion building into what you have already been stipulating within partnership studies regarding respect?

Eisler: It is not coincidental that in a domination-oriented culture, respect is often confused with fear—fear of harm, fear of pain, fear of death. As contemporary societies have shifted, and as some Indigenous societies have survived, care has become an important part of respect. You see, for example, that in Finland, a Nordic country.

They are not socialist. They have a successful market economy, yet they are often labelled socialist. They have caring policies, and that is precisely why they have such a successful market economy.

They have caring policies: paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, health care for everyone, and affordable—and yes, well-paid—child care, because it is government-subsidized. I propose caring economics that goes beyond both capitalism and socialism to, first of all, have the realm of economics include what is now excluded as “reproductive”: the three life-sustaining sectors—the natural economy, the household economy, and the volunteer community economy, —because we have inherited uncaring and disrespectful attitudes toward the work of care in all of these sectors.

There is nothing in the classic writings of either capitalism or socialism—neither in Smith nor in Marx—about caring for nature, which cares for us. What came to mind for me is the Minangkabau: they are partially Muslim and partially Indigenous; they describe themselves as matriarchal, but they are best understood as a partnership society. They emphasize the caring parts of nature, the life-supporting parts of nature, rather than emphasizing, as we have in much of our secular literature, the dangerous or indifferent parts of nature.

Valuing caring depends on where your priorities are. The Minangkabau also have caring policies.

Jacobsen: When I was travelling for my second major trip this year—six or seven weeks through Europe and a little of the Middle East—the first place I wanted to go, to get a sense of the culture, was Iceland, where I stayed for three weeks. When I first landed at the airport, I went to the men’s bathroom. The men’s bathroom had a baby-changing table. In many places, you can go into a unisex bathroom, which may or may not be available, but in a men-only bathroom, it is uncommon in many parts of North America. Yet in that men-only bathroom, it was there—and it was being used.

Many changing tables in North America gather dust. This was my first time in the bathroom at Keflavík International Airport, and the changing table was in use, with a man doing the work. It does not need to be framed in the language of 1970s consciousness-raising—though that can be appropriate in some theoretical contexts. It can be a slight behavioural change: getting over hesitation and then doing something basic.

Changing his child's diaper is as basic as being on a construction site and putting caps on exposed rebar. I used to do that as a teenager while working a bit of construction. I am not saying I was good at it, but I am saying I did it.

Iceland, as you noted, is among the Nordic countries—and while some include Iceland in the Nordic category and others debate the category—it does very well according to the World Economic Forum. You noted how Ireland changed very quickly; others, like Iceland, have had a slower but very successful progression. What do you make of very basic behavioural changes, within a generation, in how we understand what counts as work—work we all have to do?

Eisler: We have to ensure our policies keep pace with the changes. Many men, including older men, are challenging old stereotypes of masculinity. The old stereotype of masculinity is an uncaring one. Caring has been coded as feminine in domination systems—soft, not masculine.

These men are saying, "No, I can do "women's work," and my wife or partner can do "men's work," But in domination systems a woman the normative belief is a woman can't be a leader, can't be a manager unless she inherits the position from a man, or like Maggie Thatcher, proves that she embraces "masculine" domination values. It is changing, but unfortunately, our policies and resource allocations, especially now in the United States, are going the other way. I think this is a temporary setback, but it is a very serious one, and a very uncaring and disrespectful setback in terms of human rights.

Jacobsen: You referenced human rights. There are two thoughts there. One, people often talk about human rights as if they were a random assortment of propositions, when in fact they are grounded in a principle: universalism. From that principle, distinct rights emerge with claims to universal application in theory, and ideally, practice follows as closely as possible.

On the other hand, principles of respect and care—even without a human rights framework—have existed throughout history. The human rights framework helps because it is a contemporary, empirically grounded form of universalism, but respect and care are evident in many cultural expressions. I am not sure where I am going with that. I ran out of track, and I have no breadcrumbs to go home.

Could you see respect and care as more universal than human rights in some way, because they are older and more biologically grounded rather than cognitively and rationally grounded?

Eisler: The problem is that in societies oriented toward domination—and we are still emerging from that and saying this is not what we want—respect and care are reserved for those at the top, whether in the family, academia, politics, or economics. I would say that, yes, we humans have a huge capacity for empathy. That is our evolutionary gift.

Evolution has moved in that direction, but the domination system conditions us—with its economic rewards and family structures—to compartmentalize, or, at worst, suppress our capacity for respect. It becomes an in-group versus out-group dynamic. I think there are two basic components of respect.

One is the human rights component, which applies not just to the in-group but to everyone, recognizing that we are all interconnected. Physics now even shows this at the subatomic level: the Nobel Prize was awarded for work demonstrating quantum entanglement. And today we are interconnected not only by global technologies of transportation and communication, but also by technologies of destruction such as nuclear and biological warfare, and more slowly by climate change.

As I have always emphasized, the old domination system is not adaptive, because it immediately divides us into those whom you must respect—meaning fear, ultimately—and those whose human rights you can disregard, oppress, exile, or kill.

Jacobsen: Okay. So we are in a rough patch when it comes to care and respect. What is your short coda on getting through it? You have seen cycles like this before. Now it is particularly rough because there is a strong, unified push in the opposite direction.

Eisler: We have to understand our interconnection and recognize that we have the human capacity—shaped by evolution—for respect that is care, caring respect. It is not only our basic human capacity, but also essential in this age of high technology.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 20: Nonviolence, 'Irenic' Peace, and Partnership Alternatives

In this conversation, Scott Douglas Jacobsen asks Riane Eisler how partnership thinking reframes nonviolence beyond a mere negation. Eisler traces the term to domination traditions that normalize coercion, arguing reformers still lack a frame spanning family life, gender, religion, and geopolitics. As a Holocaust refugee, she rejects absolutism: nonviolence is preferable, yet defense can be necessary against genocidal threats. They critique fear-based “God-fearing” scripts as training for authoritarianism, then workshop language—Eisler’s “hierarchies of actualization” and Jacobsen’s “irenic”—to name peace-seeking, non-aggressive resistance without centering violence. The aim is an attractive partnership alternative to tyranny—one that people can join without fear today.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I remember going to Geneva, Switzerland, in the summer this year for a week to cover some of the UN Human Rights Council. I got some interviews when I was there. When I was walking there each day, there was a protest each time, and so I would say, “Hi, my name is Scott. I’m a Canadian journalist. I’m lost right now. Can I do your interview?” They would say, “Sure. It’s very Canadian. Come on in.” And so I would go into their tent and do the interview, hopefully in English, often not. Then I would walk up a little curve to the front gates to get my press pass to go to basically the United Nations Office at Geneva, at the Palais des Nations.

And each time, I would look to the right, and there, in the tall grass, was a statue of Gandhi. And you see a very prominent figure of nonviolence. There are often differing views on him. Some would say it is pathologically so. Others would say admirably ambitious in the degree to which he was advocating nonviolence. Now, within a partisan model, what is nonviolence? How does it differ from Peace? And, as you joked in earlier sessions, why do we have to use negation to get to the idea of nonviolence without an original term for nonviolence as such?

Riane Eisler: You know the answer to that very well, because we have inherited so much that is a domination tradition. We have inherited this, and one by one, all of these traditions have been challenged. The so-called divinely ordained rule of kings. The so-called divinely ordained rule of men over women and children. The so-called divinely ordained right of a so-called superior race over an inferior race.

The peace movement. The economic justice movement. The environmental movement challenges dominion over our Mother Earth, over nature, over everything that moves on this Earth. But we have not had the frame, and it has been tough to get even people who want a better world, who understand that it is possible, who are working for it, to understand what Einstein said, which is that we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them. Or what Gandhi said, which is that we must not mistake the habitual for the natural. It is a wonderful phrase.

Those are essential insights, and I am quoting two men. With Gandhi, by the way, his wife was a real partner, though not at the beginning. At the beginning, Gandhi was giving orders, and she

was obeying. But as time went on, they became partners. And I think that she, Kasturba Gandhi—I was in a film about her. What was it called? Who remembers? But I can put you in touch with the woman who is making it. And it would be interesting to interview her.

But to your point, we need this partnership-domination scale frame, because the domination frame includes family and childhood. It includes gender. Big time.

Jacobsen: A rational critique of philosophy as a whole is a reliance on two things. One, personalities. Two quotes. These are different forms of argument from authority, which, within philosophy’s investigations of logic itself, are invalid. However, they can be helpful placeholders. So in many conversations and interviews I do, quotes, aphorisms, and authority figures come into the fray, which are essential because these people are the originators of the ideas or have a clever way of framing things with a quote. Outside of figures like Einstein or Gandhi and others, on nonviolence, what is the core principle or set of principles that produce this idea of nonviolence that, in a contemporary context, can meet the challenges of making absolute nonviolence?

Eisler: That is a huge question, because we are in a time with one foot still in the domination side and another foot in trying to change the world toward the partnership side. So I do not have the answer to that. I am a nonviolent person. I can only account for myself. I do know one thing: nonviolent movements have statistically been more successful. But this is a difficult question. When do we not defend ourselves?

I am a Holocaust refugee. As a child, my parents and I had to flee my native Vienna. If we had not fought the violence of the Nazis with violence, the Nazis would have won. So it is not black-and-white. I would say that wherever possible, we want to use nonviolence. And wherever it is not possible, we have to defend ourselves until we can show people worldwide that there is a better alternative that does not cause all of this suffering, violence, and fear. That we have a partnership alternative, and that we have had this for millennia. And that the domination system is not adaptive at this level of technological development. It is taking us to an evolutionary dead end.

Jacobsen: I am going to violate what I just said in the last question by quoting someone. Dr. Anthony B. Pinn of Rice University is an academic humanist. He has a strong critical eye on parts of the humanist movement. He talks about reframing what he describes as a defeatist attitude as a set of humanist ideals when they encounter problems attracting people to the movement. For instance, he does not want to frame the question as, “Why are people not coming to humanism?”

He frames it instead, in lectures, as, “Why are we not providing such an attractive alternative that people say, ‘Why would I not join this movement?’” That is the appropriate reframing. I do not think there is a more efficient way to frame it. I think he really nailed that. So, in a sense, in terms of nonviolence, not as apathy—I mean, someone can be apathetic and nonviolent, but that is not what you are describing. You are talking about an active process of fighting tyranny without becoming that tyranny, while engaging in nonviolence. I think that is, in a way, an

enactment of Pinn’s reframing: why are we not creating such an attractive alternative that people say, “I should join that”?

Eisler: It is not that simple. People who are raised in dominant families, who are traumatized, who are taught to identify with those on top of the pyramid—whether in the family or in economics—only see two alternatives. You either dominate or you are dominated. And religion—well, you know my position—that it is not religion per se that is the problem. It is that religion has become one of the most important sources of mythology, teaching us, starting very early, before our brains are fully formed, that what we must do is be God-fearing.

And if we have to flatter the deity—the male deity, especially in the Abrahamic religions—I think I told you that I went to hear Mozart’s *Requiem*, and when they showed the text, I realized I never want to see it again if I have to look at what the script actually says. It was all about, “Oh dear God, we lick your feet, we love you, and we obey you.” And we sang that.

Jacobsen: I was in a university choir. We sang the whole thing, too.

Eisler: I thought, “Ugh.” The music is so beautiful, and the script is so horrible. It is really the worst possible script I have ever heard, and it is all addressed to this male God whom we are supposed to fear. These religions that teach this and hammer it into us are terrible in their propaganda for authoritarianism, for male dominance, for the really horrid things that follow from believing there are only two alternatives: you either dominate or you are dominated. So naturally, you want to dominate rather than be dominated.

Jacobsen: If you could coin a term—or if you have, or if you have come across a term other than nonviolence to characterize nonviolence—what would it be? A non-negation term.

Eisler: I coined terms, such as hierarchies of domination and hierarchies of actualization. Maybe actualization rather than domination and violence. It is very tough, but we have to coin the term. We cannot just go around saying nonviolence, because that reinforces violence. It is part of the phrase. Let me think about it some more. But if I have not done it, it is not because I have not thought it essential. It is because Peace is such a silly term. We say, “I feel peaceful,” or “we have peace in the world,” and then look at this season. The amount of violence. This is the season of Peace. Lots of luck. Thank you. The headlines are terrific, aren’t they? All about violence.

Jacobsen: There is one term called *irenica*. It does not include the negation in the explicit term, but in the definition, it refers to non-aggression.

Eisler: The goddess Irene is in it, because she is a goddess of Peace, isn’t she?

Jacobsen: It is aimed at Peace and non-aggression. It was used earlier, primarily in the mid-nineteenth century, especially within Christian theology, to reconcile different denominations. So it is about coming together. It is a partnership.

Eisler: Yes, although often that coming together was still an in-group versus out-group dynamic.

Jacobsen: Yes. But in a non-theological, secular context, it has a more expansive meaning.

Eisler: That is really interesting, and I will write it down, because I like it. And I like that it is associated with the goddess Irene, who, if I remember correctly, was a Roman deity.

Jacobsen: Does that mean it was built off a Greek deity rather than a Roman one?

Eisler: Yes, but the Greek deities—many of the older ones—were associated with peaceful qualities, *irenic* qualities, yet they also embodied death. We must not confuse death, which is a natural part of life, with violence. That is the design: we all die. That is the one thing we can be certain of, right?

Jacobsen: A shared experience.

Eisler: Yes. But *irenic* does not communicate quite enough. The problem is—and this is why *nonviolence* is used, I suppose—because violence is still the norm for maintaining domination systems, whether it is divinely sanctioned violence, capricious violence, the violence of rulers, or the violence of fathers or mothers.

As you know, I have long held that changing the masculine stereotype is just as important as changing the feminine stereotype, and changing the ranking of them, and the lack of fluidity—women, men, prescribed roles, divinely ordained roles. It requires great creativity, and *irenic* is about as good as it gets, I suppose, except it isn't comprehensible enough because not enough people know about the goddess Irene.

Jacobsen: Yes, that is an excellent point.

Eisler: You take good care of yourself and have a lovely holiday.

Jacobsen: I will take wonderfully terrible care of myself, thank you very much, as usual, and we will be in touch.

Partnership Studies 21: Marketing Manipulation, Domination Systems, and Partnership Economics

In this conversation, Scott Douglas Jacobsen asks Riane Eisler how marketing turns trauma and insecurity into profitable "needs." Eisler argues advertising repurposes psychology to manipulate wants, sustaining domination-oriented economics by filling the emptiness produced by in-group/out-group hierarchies and rigid gender roles. Basic consumption meets real needs—food, shelter, clothing, and self-respect—while manufactured desires promise status and belonging through excess. She traces similar "sales" logic in religious mythmaking and warns that secular culture can reproduce the same distortions. A partnership framework, she suggests, shifts incentives toward caring connection, empathy, and well-being rather than control, competition, and compulsive consumption—and ecological sustainability, too, for everyone.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Marketing and consumption are framed as a "science," where people are made to feel less than, which is what people are often made to think through trauma, family trauma, and economic trauma. This is an entirely improvised question. People are given a fabricated want or aversion to fill through widespread consumption, and that consumption is, in many ways, mediated by marketing and advertising. What is the partnership studies framework for economics, marketing, consumption, and related areas?

Riane Eisler: It recognizes that marketing and advertising have taken what we know from psychology and the social sciences and turned it into the manipulation of people's wants and needs. It is fascinating, but at the same time very troubling. It is part of contemporary domination-oriented economic systems because, as a larger middle class began to emerge in many industrializing societies, in part due to the Industrial Revolution, there was a challenge to the traditional top-down system. That challenge was more than met by marketing and advertising, which became tools for increasing consumption, used to help fill a sense of emptiness or void created and maintained by the larger domination system.

Jacobsen: So what separates, in your view, this pathology of consumption from the necessity of consumption?

Eisler: We need to eat. We need a roof over our heads. We have basic needs as human beings. The system creates artificial needs under the guise of fulfilling basic needs, including valuing and feeling good about yourself, both of which are very difficult in domination systems.

Let us start with what domination systems do. They create in-groups and out-groups. Most people in today's world are affected by this in one way or another. Those on top are nervous that someone else will displace them — replace them, really. Those at the bottom are struggling.

What the domination system does is convince them — and, in many historical and contemporary cases, religion plays an essential part in this pyramid — that they must flatter, believe, and obey those on top. It does this by identifying the people on top as "job creators," for example, in modern industrial and post-industrial economies, rather than as exploiters protected by the

domination system. Partnership-oriented systems are not entirely equal, but they do not organize society around rigidly fixed "those on the bottom" and "those on the top" in the same way.

That makes a significant difference. So how do you maintain a domination system once industrial production and modern economies can generate enough manufactured and consumer goods — clothing, housing materials, and so forth — to meet people's basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing? You have to convince them that if they consume more than they need to satisfy their basic needs, they will feel better.

I keep thinking of an old shampoo advertisement where a woman uses some product, and she is ecstatic — practically having an orgasm. What is the message of an ad like that? Or consider a man who has been socialized to feel entitled to women: there are often car advertisements featuring a beautiful woman standing next to the car, seemingly impressed or "wowed" by it.

All of these wants and needs are really the product of deprivation of closeness. Take rigid gender stereotypes, which are damaging for both men and women. Women learn to manipulate and conform. Men are expected to maintain control, whether they want to or not, and to maintain separation. The result is a mess. Then comes the use of what we know from psychology about manipulation and about marketing.

Advertising has taken that knowledge and used it to convince people that their real needs — the need for caring connection, the need for shelter, the need for food, the need for clothing, and the need to feel good about themselves — will be met if they conform to marketing and advertising messages and consume, consume, consume.

Jacobsen: What functions as a brake on this? Usually, as things move toward excess, there is pushback. What is the push and pull between the enforcement of a consumer mindset built on fabricated wants and a reintegration that returns to the basics of what we need socially — clothing, housing, food, and so on?

Eisler: That is the question we need to answer for people. What fulfills our basic needs? It requires a different view of what it means to be human. If we adopt a competition mindset — a dog-eat-dog mindset — you will take care only of yourself and perhaps your family. I say probably because studies have shown that gendered socialization can be so intense that men feel entitled to use what they earn on themselves and their perceived needs — gambling, prostitution, and so on.

For example, studies in Brazil have shown that one dollar in a mother's hands is equivalent to ten dollars in a father's. This is not because men are inherently evil, but because what I just described is part of their socialization. It is a highly complex system because it was developed in ways that effectively brainwashed people.

In my book *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, I describe how domination systems sustained themselves through story and myth after violence established control. Consider the violence of ancient domination systems: the Assyrians, for example, lined roads with crucified people. It was a reign of terror, an extreme form of domination. But what really

keeps the system going is not just the overt violence — it is the myths and stories, the distortion of what is presented as "reality."

To sustain domination, the myths and stories had to be changed to idealize rigid gender stereotypes: the hero as active, forceful, associated with what Jung called the *animus*.

In many normative stories, the hero is a killer. Think of *The Odyssey*, or some of the heroic figures in the Hebrew Bible. It is all very complicated, and people are trained to accept total contradictions and not notice passages in the Bible that clearly contradict the assertion, found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that there never was and never can be anything but a male deity. Yet in the Book of Jeremiah, for example, the prophet condemns women for baking cakes to the "Queen of Heaven." It is remarkable, but people skip over that.

Jacobsen: Also, in *Exodus* and the Ten Commandments, there is a very explicit statement — one of the first commandments — "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." If the commandments are rank-ordered, then this one addresses the existence of other gods. The deity — Yahweh — is described as jealous. If the deity is jealous and people are commanded not to worship different gods, this reflects a cultural milieu in which multiple gods were believed in and practiced. From a naturalistic lens on the psychosocial and cultural history of religion, this points to an implicit polytheistic environment attempting to consolidate monotheism.

Eisler: Yes, Raphael Patai, who was both a cultural historian and drew heavily on archaeological findings, repeatedly documented that during the same period reflected in the biblical texts — when prophets were recorded as condemning the people for deviating from exclusive worship of a jealous God — there were idols to Asherah, and idols to male deities as well. There was polytheism. But that is largely omitted or minimized in the biblical narrative.

So the written tradition gives us a distorted picture of historical reality. In a sense, it is brilliant: systems of belief can grant benefits, such as reduced time in purgatory — historically, in medieval Christianity through indulgences — if one pays the church a specified amount in local currency. It becomes incredibly complex.

Jacobsen: Could we see the marketing and advertising of Yahweh—or of monotheistic religion more broadly—as a prototype for modern multinational corporate culture, in which marketing and advertising are treated as a "science" designed to cultivate fabricated wants?

Eisler: As an analytical framing, there is a functional similarity between some religious promise-structures and modern advertising. Advertising and marketing present visual stories of people feeling joyful, fulfilled, and complete because of a product they are encouraged to buy. Many religious traditions—monotheistic ones included—also contain promises of ultimate meaning, belonging, protection, or reward, though those promises are often oriented toward the afterlife, moral order, or communal identity rather than toward material consumption in this world.

In some forms of Christianity—especially in later Protestant traditions and, more recently, in "prosperity gospel" movements—the idea that God will bless the faithful in this life becomes central. In Islam, long-standing teachings emphasize divine justice, moral accountability, and

providence, but it would be inaccurate to treat material prosperity in this life as a uniform or dominant doctrine across Muslim history. More broadly, across traditions, fulfillment is often promised but deferred to an afterlife, a future redemption, or an ideal moral order.

Historically, Western Christianity developed robust systems of fear and relief around sin, punishment, and salvation. In late medieval Catholicism, indulgences were formally defined as the remission of temporal punishment for sin under specific theological conditions. Abuses in their promotion and sale became a major scandal and a catalyst for the Reformation. It is therefore more accurate to say that people were sometimes led to believe spiritual penalties could be reduced through church-mediated practices, rather than simply "paying the church to shorten time in purgatory."

Modern marketing and advertising are largely secular institutions. For that reason, the most illuminating distinction is not always between religion and secularism, but between partnership-oriented and domination-oriented cultures along the partnership–domination continuum. A secular consumer society can distort needs and wants in ways that function similarly to distortions produced by religious hierarchy.

What is being sold differs, but the underlying social message can remain the same: some belong to the in-group, while others are pushed to the margins. Separation becomes normal rather than a caring connection. To feel valued or fulfilled, individuals are encouraged to defer to consumer messaging, institutional authority, or both.

We live in an era of competing myths—not a simple binary, but a crowded marketplace of meaning. Alongside multinational corporations and transnational movements, traditional religions continue to shape the lives of billions of people. Not all major world religions are monotheistic—Hindu traditions, for example, are internally diverse and are often described as polytheistic, monistic, or henotheistic depending on the school—but all large systems of belief construct narratives that organize identity, desire, and belonging.

This dynamic is visible in desires that go beyond basic needs—things people feel they require but that are often socially manufactured wants. There is a symmetry between longing for eternal life and longing for eternal youth: both can be leveraged by institutions that promise fulfillment while maintaining dependence.

Across both secular and religious myth-systems, a recurring pattern is the logic of domination: comply, conform, purchase, or obey—or risk exclusion, shame, punishment, or loss of meaning. In consumer culture, the mechanism is buying; in some religious systems, it is fear of spiritual consequences. In functional terms, both can reduce human flourishing to submission to external authority. Both systems can end up delivering the same pressure: do as I say.

Jacobsen: Whether it is telling people they need to buy more, or that they need to support the church, the mosque, or some other institution—because those institutions present themselves as intermediaries between the individual and a punitive, male deity—there seems to be a shared structure at work.

Is there one key difference, though? In corporate advertising, the promise is focused on an idealized terrestrial life: eternal youth, perfect memory, bodily enhancement. Take this pill, and you will become better. In religious myths, by contrast, what is promised is usually perfection in an entirely different realm.

Eisler: Consider Islam, for example, where rewards for martyrdom are explicitly located in the afterlife, not in this world. More broadly, many religious traditions have emphasized that this life is not what ultimately counts. That logic even appears, somewhat unexpectedly, in Buddhism.

Buddhism incorporates the principle of not harming, but it is framed as a negative command rather than a positive vision of flourishing. The result can feel strange, even pathological. Advertising operates similarly, yet it passes as usual for people who have been conditioned to listen either to the priesthood of marketing or the priesthood of religion.

Jacobsen: A central component of mental health is functional reality-testing: being in touch with the world, understanding social dynamics, and maintaining a coherent internal sense of self. Do these promises—whether extraterrestrial and heavenly, or terrestrial and consumer-driven—create conditions under which people may struggle to maintain psychological health?

Eisler: They tend to create dependence on a higher authority. You will receive something if you buy or if you obey. In consumer culture, the higher authority consists of those who sell and market products. In religion, the higher authority is framed as divine, mediated through institutions. In both cases, agency is diminished.

People become more like puppets on strings than active, healthy, autonomous human beings. This is why the crucial distinction is not between secularism and religion, but between domination and partnership. That is why I introduce the domination–partnership continuum as a worldview.

Jacobsen: It is often framed as a social scale because human beings are a social species.

Eisler: Yes, from birth onward, we are interdependent. We rely on caring connections to survive and to thrive. Research on infants in orphanages shows that the absence of a loving connection negatively affects brain development itself. Some children do not survive at all.

Jacobsen: Do we see different forms of pathology along that social scale? The distinction should not simply be secular versus religious. However, within the domination–partnership model, that contrast may still be analytically useful in this case. In corporate systems, the pathology often emphasizes radical individualism, which produces isolation and social fragmentation.

In religious systems, by contrast, there is often genuine community, which is frequently noted as a strength. Yet, as you suggested earlier, it is often a community structured around a male authority figure—a priest, an imam, or a rabbi—who holds varying degrees of unquestioned power.

Eisler: These figures function as intermediaries between individuals and a supreme male deity. That mediation confers power. Marketers also hold power, even though they typically operate as

employees of transnational corporations. They draw on secular knowledge, including insights derived from science, to influence behaviour and sustain patterns of consumption. In both cases, people are kept dependent—either on buying or on obedience.

I remember visiting a basilica in Rome and reading that if you knelt up the steps with a contrite heart, your time in purgatory would be reduced by a specified amount. There was, of course, a theological caveat—the requirement of sincere contrition—but the transactional logic was still present.

In both systems, some form of reward is exchanged for compliance. Churches receive donations; corporations receive purchases. Religion, however, is a two-edged sword. The Catholic Church, for example, has done immense good. At the same time, its history includes episodes such as the Crusades, including campaigns like the Albigensian Crusade, which targeted fellow Christians. These events reflect a troubling alliance between religious institutions and secular rulers—emperors, kings, and other authorities.

Many people come to treat these arrangements as simply "reality," and that is part of the problem. The deeper reality is that no amount of consumption can replace a caring connection. While many religions explicitly criticize materialism, it is also problematic to base one's life entirely on what is promised after death, on what is framed as life beyond this so-called vale of tears. Much of this functions as propaganda for maintaining domination systems.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for the opportunity and for your time, Riane.

Partnership Studies 22: Domination Aesthetics, Partnership Art, and the Politics of Architecture

In this exchange, Scott Douglas Jacobsen asks Riane Eisler how domination and partnership orientations show up in art, architecture, and the moral purpose of aesthetics. Eisler describes domination art as monumental, hierarchical, and awe-producing—towering deities, triumphal forms, and “great man” iconography that naturalize obedience and power. Partnership-leaning cultures, she argues, more often emphasize nature, interconnection, cyclical symbols like spirals, and influential female figures not reduced to object or stereotype. They may also embed care in production—fewer glorifications of killing, more communal responsibility. Eisler calls for systematic art-historical study using the partnership–domination lens.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Everyone has a way of looking at the world and what they enjoy looking at. We can call that aesthetics, which spans a spectrum from what we find beautiful to what we find ugly. In domination systems, when you look internationally over time, what do you usually see in domination art and architecture? What do you notice in partnership-oriented aesthetics?

Riane Eisler: In domination systems, the first examples that come to mind are immense statues of a male deity—say, Zeus—with tiny human figures at the base, shown as insignificant in comparison. Monumental architecture uses awe to reinforce hierarchy. Domination systems build cathedrals and other enormous structures dedicated to the deity of the day. The specifics vary, but the message remains consistent: the deity is excellent, and you are nothing—unless you obey, in which case you may be granted a small measure of value.

It is reasonable to ask how many people died in the construction of such works. I do not know the exact number, but it is safe to assume that many did, and not only men. Archaeological evidence increasingly shows that the strict role separation portrayed in bestselling books like *The Naked Ape* is not a universal fact about our deep past but is powerfully shaped by modern assumptions of male domination over women. In some societies, women did take part in hunting, and there is evidence that some hunters could have been pregnant women as well, which has surprised many researchers.

Normative myths about gender and hierarchy have not changed enough. New information from archaeology and holistic analyses of our past and present reaches us in fragments, without much connection. Unless someone is trained in whole-systems thinking, it is not easy to put these findings together into a coherent picture.

Old stories and old art often glorified acts such as the “rape of Lucretia” and similar scenes. For a long period in European history, art was funded and promoted mainly by those in power, so the question becomes: what kinds of art did they choose to support?

Jacobsen: Are there architectural analyses showing differences between partnership societies and domination societies—such as smoother, more organic lines in partnership societies, and more rigid, straight-line or diagonal structures in domination societies?

Eisler: I have not thought about that specifically. I think of places like Çatalhöyük, which were not exactly monumental in the same way, but represent a very different kind of built environment. I do not know, but continue with that thought, because it connects to some things I have learned.

Jacobsen: I have done interviews with, at least, one carver in the Pacific Northwest, and you see the S-curve and the formline style in Indigenous carving—the totem poles and related work. There is a specific art to it, and clear cultural rules about how you are supposed to do it so that you get the formlines right. These societies were often organized on matrilineal lines rather than strictly patriarchal ones, compared with European societies of the same period. If you look at the Soviet period, you see what we often describe as brutalist or starkly functional architecture: very gray, straight lines, highly functional, reflecting a society run by administrators. In modern corporate culture—New York in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for example—you see many skyscrapers characterized by rigid vertical lines. In other societies, you sometimes see more creativity in how the architecture is done, especially when an architect and an engineering team work together on something more experimental. So there may be indications of domination versus partnership in architecture, but I am not entirely sure.

Eisler: Spirals were a very prominent theme in Minoan art and architecture, as well as in earlier partnership-oriented art. They seem to be connected to a cyclical view of life, death, and rebirth. We do not know this for sure because we do not have clear written records from that time explaining the symbolism. But again and again in that art, the female figure is depicted differently. She is not shown as a sexual object for men or reduced to the Christian dichotomy of virgin versus “fallen woman.” She is powerful.

The way women and men are depicted is different overall. The kind of exalted lone-warrior scenes we associate with later epics do not, as far as current evidence shows, appear in Paleolithic or early Neolithic art. It takes an art historian using this framework to look systematically for patterns. What you describe is monumental architecture and monumental art: the “needle,” the phallic obelisk as a sign of victory. Then there is the arch of triumph, where a rounded form is co-opted and turned into a symbol of armed victory.

Jacobsen: What about the moral value of art in domination versus partnership societies—how it is understood, and what it is seen as applicable for, within the context of that society?

Eisler: I think of the theme of the so-called Exodus, a forced expulsion from paradise, and how that idea has, in a sense, shifted with the environmental movement.

I have not studied this in depth, but landscapes were secondary in much older Western art. The figures in the foreground were religious protagonists, rulers, and later the wealthy merchant class—think of Dutch Golden Age painting. The focus remained on those at the top of the social hierarchy. It is not until the Impressionists that you see a renewed emphasis on nature as a primary subject rather than a backdrop.

Jacobsen: Something that appears again and again in popular commentary is the “great man theory” of history—the idea that history turns on a handful of exceptional individuals. These

figures were often brilliant and talented, but history did not hinge on them alone. That myth is separate from the historical record, yet it pairs neatly with the idea of the “self-made individual” in the modern era, which has been damaging for both individuals and communities. How does that thinking—whether or not it was framed that way at the time—shape art and society internally? How does it manifest in artistic representation?

Eisler: You already know the basic answer. Look at whose busts and statues dominate classical Greece. The people represented are consistently those at the top. Philosophers are an interesting case. The one philosopher who openly mocked prevailing norms—Socrates—was condemned to death and forced to take poison. Yet, as a group, philosophers still reached the upper cultural strata, in part because they tried to explain why men were dissatisfied, as if men could ever be content under rigid domination.

A book that opened my eyes to ancient Athens was *The Reign of the Phallus* by Eva Keuls. I had an excellent education in Cuba, but we were never taught how pervasive the symbolism of the phallus was in classical Athens. Large phallic sculptures were common, particularly in gardens and public spaces. The phallus was a symbol of power. My book *Sacred Pleasure* has a chapter titled “The Reign of the Phallus” that explores this as well, but Keuls’ book is essential reading.

This is what we have idealized as the foundation of “Western civilization,” yet even in classical times, there were countercurrents. For example, Aristophanes wrote *Lysistrata*, a play centered on women using a sex strike to force men to end war—an early expression of women’s resistance to domination and militarism.

Jacobsen: The play you are referring to is the one in which women refuse sex as a protest against the Peloponnesian War. That strategy has appeared in more than one historical instance and even in contemporary times. In at least one recent case—Somalia during the civil conflict—a sex strike reportedly contributed to peace negotiations. Rwanda is sometimes mentioned as well. So we cannot dismiss the power of disincentives.

Eisler: Before we wrap up: when I say I had a very classical education, it clearly was not complete, because when I read Eva Keuls’ *The Reign of the Phallus*, I found material that had never appeared in my formal studies. She is a classicist who closely examined ancient Greek culture and highlighted elements that are not usually taught.

Jacobsen: Would you, to close, offer any speculation on what people might find if they conducted a trans-historical or cross-cultural study of the *production* of art—step-by-step, how art is made—and how that might differ between domination-oriented societies and partnership-oriented ones? For example, in domination societies where the lives of people with low incomes are valued less, especially those doing the physical construction, I would speculate that you would expect higher mortality in the creation of monumental works than in societies with more partnership values.

Eisler: I think you would. I have done some of this work because art is a symbolic language. If you compare art from periods when societies were more oriented toward partnership than domination—not perfectly, but significantly—you see evidence that people cared more about

each other. Cooperative parenting was the norm in some of these societies; the whole community felt responsible for caring for children, regardless of parentage or origin.

Çatalhöyük, for example, was multiracial and multicultural, and people lived together for an extended period in relative harmony. But in the upper layers of the site, something changes. Whether this shift was caused by invasion or emerged as wealth accumulated is unclear. There has been a historical overemphasis on hoarding and on violence to obtain resources. That becomes the norm later.

In the earlier art, you see influential female figures and an emphasis on nature. In Minoan art, for example, there is a strong sense of interconnection. And that interconnection portrayed in art goes way back—look at the figure on the cover of *The Chalice and the Blade*. She is a bird goddess who is simultaneously phallic in form and has breasts: an interconnection of male and female, deity and nature. It is all present if you look closely.

There are very few hunting scenes, and even fewer scenes of killing. Later, you see idealized “heroic” warriors—celebrations of killing—and of male domination over women. You cannot miss it if you use the partnership-domination frame when looking at the art.

I do not know precisely what a systematic cross-cultural study would conclude, but I know art is transforming now. Performance art and storytelling are growing. The stories being told are not necessarily the old stories glorifying stereotypical masculinity and femininity or ranking male over female and masculine over feminine. It is a compelling time to pay attention to art.

Because today you see two major strands. There is still monumental art—grand ballrooms in seats of power, presidential faces carved onto mountains, symbols of political dominance. And then there is art that does something else entirely: splashes of colour, non-linear forms, works that feel like a search for meaning rather than a declaration of it. What exactly are they searching for? That is the open question.

Jacobsen: That is a good place to end.

Partnership Studies 23: Restorative Justice: Partnership vs Domination in Criminal Law

In this interview, Scott Douglas Jacobsen speaks with Riane Eisler about justice through her partnership–domination lens. Jacobsen contrasts retributive criminal law with restorative practice that treats wrongdoing as harm requiring repair, accountability, and reintegration. Eisler argues punitive systems reflect domination mythologies that portray people as inherently bad, encouraging exclusion and lifelong stigma, including barriers to employment. She links violence to learned family patterns—“peace begins at home”—and frames restorative justice as evidence of a cultural shift toward partnership. The pair probe risks of trauma-as-excuse, concluding that acknowledging causality must strengthen responsibility, not erase it, so rehabilitation remains credible, humane, and effective.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We are going to focus on two forms of justice. One is punitive—or, more precisely, retributive—justice as a traditional model in criminal law. Retributive approaches are often criticized for centering punishment of the offender, sometimes at the expense of victims’ needs, rehabilitation, and prevention.

Restorative justice contrasts with this by reframing wrongdoing as harm done to people and relationships rather than merely a violation of legal rules. It is often framed through questions such as: who was hurt, what do they need, and who has responsibilities to repair that harm? It emphasizes repair, accountability, and reintegration.

The United States is frequently cited as a contemporary case where reintegration remains difficult, and where reoffending rates are high compared with many European systems. What are your thoughts on these two approaches?

Riane Eisler: We have a heritage of punitive or retributive “justice,” rooted in domination-oriented systems. More recently, restorative and rehabilitative movements have become more mainstream, signaling a shift toward partnership. The premise is that we have often approached justice in the wrong way: people should be supported in returning from harmful actions and, where possible, in making amends to those they have harmed.

This connects directly to partnership versus domination. Many Indigenous legal traditions and many small-scale societies have historically emphasized relational repair, community responsibility, and reintegration rather than punishment alone, although practices vary widely across cultures and historical periods.

Where justice systems emphasize rehabilitation—as is often highlighted in parts of Northern Europe—reported recidivism rates tend to be lower than in more punitive systems, although cross-national comparisons require caution due to differences in legal definitions, reporting standards, and data collection methods.

Ultimately, this discussion turns on worldview: whether we see people as permanently flawed and therefore manageable only through control, or as capable of accountability, repair, and

change within systems designed for reintegration. That underlying assumption shapes whether justice systems prioritize domination or partnership.

If you compare the treatment of people convicted of crimes in Finland or Sweden with that in the United States, the difference is striking. Even so, within the United States there are jurisdictions and programs where recidivism rates are lower and where incarcerated people are treated as human beings capable of change.

We also know that violence is learned, and that it is often learned first within families. That is why we recently held a virtual summit called *Peace Begins at Home*, to help people connect these dots. If something is learned, it can also be unlearned.

A punitive or retributive system often makes what psychologists call the fundamental attribution error: it treats wrongdoing as evidence that something is fundamentally wrong with the person. This is not a religious system, but it carries a similar assumption—that once someone has committed a crime, they are inherently bad and cannot truly redeem themselves.

That assumption follows people long after incarceration. When individuals are released, many employers are unwilling to hire them. In this sense, punishment extends beyond prison walls. At the same time, there are NGOs devoted to helping formerly incarcerated people find employment, which shows that alternative approaches exist.

In this area, as in so many others, we see a struggle between an underlying domination system—with its particular beliefs and worldview—and a partnership-oriented system with a very different worldview. Both exist at the same time. The real question is how to help the majority of people understand this difference. The only way I can see is by changing the mythology surrounding what we call “human nature.”

Whose needs does punishment actually serve? It is usually said to serve society’s needs, and partly it reflects a desire for fairness. Studies of children show that they want those who cheat or harm others to be punished, and that tendency appears early. But that does not mean punishment itself is a fundamental human need. If it were, restorative justice movements would not exist, and many Indigenous societies would not prioritize repair, reintegration, and reconciliation over exclusion whenever possible.

Whether someone can be redeemed is not always clear. It may be that some people are so deeply traumatized that change is extremely difficult. History does give us examples, particularly when we look at leadership across different eras. In many cases, such figures seek to suppress alternatives because they define them as evil or threatening.

Politically, punishment can be mobilized for support. In the United States, calls for harsher laws and more severe punishment often resonate with voters. This tendency also bleeds into social life. Americans, broadly speaking, can be socially punitive, carrying strong prejudgments that cut across political and social lines. At the extremes, different groups define an “ultimate bad,” and individuals associated with that category become targets.

It is often not the group in the abstract that suffers directly, but the individual who is labeled as belonging to that group. Ultimately, this comes back to beliefs about human nature. If people are seen as inherently bad or sinful, punishment becomes the default response.

That assumption is not unique to modern societies. Historically, rigidly domination-oriented systems often dealt with crime by executing offenders rather than attempting rehabilitation. Modern prisons are a comparatively recent invention, and even they reflect differing assumptions about whether people are capable of change.

Jacobsen: Is there any strength in the idea of an abstract legal code with universal application, even within a retributive justice system? In other words, while the punishments may be extreme, does the principle of equal treatment under the law offer any redeeming value within domination-oriented systems?

Eisler: I do not think the issue is really one of abstract versus concrete law. The core issue is punishment itself. If you believe that human nature is fundamentally bad, then redemption is not part of the system. Punishment becomes the central response, rather than repair, accountability, or transformation.

If you believe that humans are basically capable of good—most of them, at least—there are still difficult cases to consider. Some people appear to derive pleasure from other people’s suffering. I have not studied the genetic literature on this in depth, but in most cases I would say such behavior is linked to trauma. I am not an expert, though.

From a biological perspective, we can reasonably point to variation. Evolution produces differences. You will find people who are highly empathetic, and you will also find people who, despite environment or upbringing, consistently display harmful behavior—perhaps due to a combination of genetic and epigenetic factors. I do not know the proportions. But I would argue that most people are capable of atonement and redemption if we address the traumas that contributed to their criminal behavior.

Jacobsen: Is there a risk, in the shift from punitive or retributive justice to restorative justice, that trauma becomes an excuse—that people avoid accountability by saying, “My trauma made me do this”?

Eisler: There is that risk, of course. It is a complicated issue. The question is whether recognizing trauma becomes a way of evading responsibility, or whether it becomes a way of understanding causality and making a genuine commitment not to repeat the harm. I do not claim expertise here, but I do know this: the restorative justice movement signals that more people are moving toward a partnership view of human nature.

You cannot meaningfully restore unless you believe that people are capable of change. That belief stands in contrast to the idea that human nature is fundamentally bad or sinful—one of the foundational myths associated with domination systems. These systems have deeply influenced many religions, though not all of them.

Within religious traditions, you often find a core ethical insight—“do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” the emphasis on responsibility and empathy—that makes harming others morally difficult. Surrounding that core, however, are layers of rules and doctrines that can obscure it.

I have often said that I hope, someday, leaders of the world’s religions will seriously engage with this issue. At present, roughly 80 percent of the world’s population still identifies with some form of religion. Until we address how scriptures are interpreted, they will continue to be used against efforts to shift toward systems that can prevent trauma to a large extent—though never completely. Trauma will always exist. People become ill. Life brings loss.

There is death, there are floods and earthquakes—there is plenty of suffering in the world—but we do not have to add to it. That is really the difference between these two beliefs: the idea that we must add suffering because of human nature, versus the belief that people can atone and be restored to being productive, caring members of society.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Riane.

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Author Biography



Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These

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Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought with over 10,000 . Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

