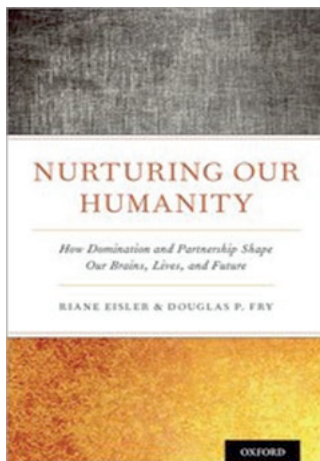


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Coral Ann Howells

**Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future**

*Riane Eisler & Douglas P. Fry. 2019. Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 360 pp., £ 22.99, ISBN 978-0-19-093572-6*



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What does it mean to be human? And how can we construct a sustainable world where we might all flourish? This book addresses these universal questions at our particular historical moment of anxiety and uncertainty about the future, offering a counter-narrative to the outburst of dystopias over the past few decades. The gist of the book might be summed up in its subtitle: “How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future”. Co-written by the enormously influential President of the Center for Partnership Studies and the anthropologist Douglas P. Fry, Chair of the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of North Carolina, it makes a persuasive case for adopting a new narrative about human beings and human possibilities. It contains a message of hope for the future, a future which is dependent on the choices we make now.

This new narrative is built on the foundations established by Eisler in *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), supplemented by Fry's ground-breaking work in *The Human Potential for Peace* (2006). Out of these studies in cultural transformation, the authors have developed an innovative analytical tool, the Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens, which synthesises research from neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, gender studies, economics, and the arts. They explain it as "the need for a biocultural paradigm that combines recent and classic findings into a new framework for better understanding how our brains interact with our environments, especially with our cultural environments as mediated by families, education, politics, economics and other social institutions" (33). In other words, this new framework combines gene-environment interaction with the *partnership-domination* continuum along which human societies can be organised.

The *partnership* paradigm promotes the values of equalitarianism<sup>1</sup>, gender equality, mutual respect, compassion and co-operation, while at the other end of the scale domination systems are hierarchical, authoritarian, masculinist and unequal, maintaining order by coercion, fear, and violence. This is a crude summary of these paradigms, within which practices vary across cultures and across time. The advantage of this model is that it reveals patterns in what otherwise may seem "random and disconnected, pointing ways of achieving systemic and sustainable change", inaugurating a fundamental shift in thinking about society. Is this another form of utopianism? No; the authors avoid this by recognising that "the *domination system* and the *partnership system* are social configurations that transcend conventional classifications such as religious v. secular, Eastern v. Western, or right v. left" (147). No society is entirely one or the other, "but the degree to which a culture orients to one or the other shapes beliefs, social structures, and how the human brain develops" (148).

Across twelve chapters which range from "Evolution, Ideology, and Human Nature", "Contracting and Expanding Consciousness", to "Love, Violence, and Socialization in Partnership and Domination Environments", ending with "The Real Culture Wars" and "A New Beginning", the authors insistently challenge traditional models which assume that aggression and violence are central to what it means to be human, arguing that "For a large-brained species like ours, there is a vast spectrum of behavioral capacities" (84) and that we are equipped for both destructiveness and creativity. That is where the nurturance (or suppression) of affective capacities assumes central importance in this argument, for "the quality of nurturance directly affects the structure of the brain" (52). Though there is no single focus in this wideranging study, there is repeated emphasis on child development, illustrated with positive and negative examples from many cultures, highlighting the importance of environmental influences on behaviour as the human qualities of love, empathy, and the power of choice are encouraged or suppressed. Closely related is the analysis and deconstruction of gender stereotypes, supported by evidence from the sciences and the humanities, with attention to male-female relationships and the position of women in different societies, once again arguing for social and gender equality. Their conclusions might be

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<sup>1</sup> "Egalitarianism" differs from the term "equalitarianism" as it traditionally described equality only between men and men (as in the works of Locke, Rousseau, and other "rights of man" philosophers, as well as modern history).

summed up in the words of Canadian human rights activist Sally Armstrong, who declared, “When women get even a bit of education, the whole of society improves. When they get a bit of health care, everyone lives longer”.

Curiously for such an extensively researched study, there are blind spots relating to LGBTQ issues, to ethnic minority rights, and the global climate emergency, which suggest that this Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens is, as the authors acknowledge, “still under construction and awaits input and testing” (33). Yet there is so much in this book to refresh our hopes for cultural transformation away from traditions of domination towards new models of partnership. Finally, the book reaches beyond its ending, for “Each Ending is a New Beginning” as Antonella Riem reminds us, with the innovative online resource education programmes and the “Safe Conversations” Webinar in September this year, all sponsored by the Center for Partnership Studies. “Give Peace a Chance” is the message at the heart of this book.

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