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Nunziana Mastrangelo

In Conversation with Riane Eisler

Riane Eisler holds degrees in Sociology and Law from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). She taught pioneering classes on women and the law at UCLA, is a founding member of the General Evolution Research Group, a fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science and World Business Academy, a councillor of the World Future Council, and a commissioner of the World Commission on Global Consciousness and Spirituality, along with the Dalai Lama and other spiritual leaders. She is co-founder of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence, president of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS), dedicated to research and education. She is best known for her international bestseller *The Chalice and The Blade. Our History, Our Future* (1987, Harper & Row) now in twenty-three languages, including Italian and most European languages, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Hebrew, Japanese, Arabic and Urdu.

Nunziana Mastrangelo This issue of *Le Simplegadi* recalls your latest book and is entitled *Nurturing Nature, Nourishing Our Humanity: Ecosustainable Narratives and Environmental Issues in Anglophone Literatures*. What inspired you to investigate the relationship between human beings and nature?

Riane Eisler All humans are part of nature and depend on nature for air, water, and other survival necessities. But how we relate to nature largely depends on our culture, on our values and our socialization. That vital issue is central to my research, writing, teaching, speaking, and activism.

NM In your books you have always described the history of humanity in relation to the partnership/dominator continuum. According to your recent work, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (2019), the shift of humanity between dominator and partnership social paradigms has influenced the impact of humanity on the environment. In what ways have you witnessed this impact in your own experience?

RE We are all experiencing climate change today, with rises in temperature, icecaps melting, rising sea levels, droughts, severe storms, and other threats to us and future generations. Much of the discussion has been about industrialisation, but actually the degradation and exploitation of our natural life support systems is not new. It has been going on ever since the shift from a partnership to a domination cultural orientation about 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, and today it is accelerating as the result of ever more powerful human technologies driven

by an ethos of domination and exploitation. This ethos is central to domination systems – and at our level of technological development threatens our species' survival.

Yet if we look at human history from the perspective of the partnership-domination social scale, we see that for many thousands of years human societies oriented to the partnership side of the partnership-domination continuum. As detailed in *Nurturing Our Humanity* and other works starting with *The Chalice and the Blade* (which is now in 57 US printings and 30 foreign editions), the evidence from archaeology, mythology, and even now DNA studies shows that these earlier societies were more peaceful (contrary to popular beliefs, war is at most 5,000 – 10,000 years old); more generally equitable (there are no signs in either dwellings or grave goods of major differences in status or wealth); and more gender balanced (the archaeologist Ian Hodder, who excavated the large Neolithic site of Catal Huyuk, presented some of this evidence in the *Scientific American*, emphasising that women and men had equal status). In other words, what we see in these societies is the partnership social configuration. Integral to this configuration was the veneration of nature's power to give and nurture life, a power our ancestors recognised is incarnated in the female body. So, we find in these societies a plethora of female figurines representing this power.

However, with the shift to domination systems, with their focus on conquest (be it of men, women, or nature), these female deities gradually disappeared or became subordinate to male deities. What is today beginning to be called "toxic masculinity" became the norm, and male identity became associated with domination and conquest. The good news is that as part of the movement from domination to partnership many of us – men and women – are rejecting this gender stereotype of "real masculinity" – along with the devaluation of the so-called "feminine" work of caring, including caring for our natural life support systems.

NM In your speech to the United Nations General Assembly meeting on Harmony with Nature (2011) you said "our global challenges – not only global warming and other environmental disasters, but much of the suffering, hunger, poverty, violence that afflicts our world – are all symptoms of an underlying dysfunction [...]". In other words, environmental issues imply a cultural, political, and economic crisis. What in your opinion is at the heart of this dysfunction?

RE The exploitation and degradation of our natural environment and the exploitation and degradation of people are not isolated matters. As noted above, they are both inherent in domination systems. When I spoke to the United Nations General Assembly, I emphasised that we cannot tack on harmony with nature to a fundamentally imbalanced system in which, starting in the family and shaping all our institutions, domination and exploitation are normalised.

For example, the most widely used metric for measuring economic health, Gross Domestic/National Product (GDP or GNP), relegates the damage human activities are inflicting on our natural environment just as "externalities". So, the trees on which we depend to breathe only show up in these metrics when they are dead, when they are chopped down, because all GDP/GNP measures is goods and services changing hands in the formal

monetised economy. Small wonder then that, again and again, environmentally conscious policies have been reversed with just the stroke of a pen, as we saw when President Trump came to power in the United States. That of course was a regression to the domination side of the social scale, but the dysfunction goes much deeper, to our legacy from more rigid domination systems. We need whole-systems change! And this includes new metrics that show the economic value of the work of caring for people, starting at birth, and caring for nature. This is why, inspired by my book *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, we are at the Center for Partnership Systems developing a Social Wealth Index that can guide policy makers, impact investors and social activists to invest in caring for people and nature.

NM As a person deeply involved in social, cultural, and economic issues, you have spoken at many environmental conferences. In addition, you are a Councilor of the World Future Council in Hamburg, which deals with the effects of environmental policies and practices on future generations. Can you expand on what you see as essential for a sustainable future?

RE What is needed is whole-systems change: a fundamental cultural shift from domination to partnership. The first step is changing our consciousness. Many current policies are still based on the notion that domination systems are inevitable. Even our language makes it hard to see that there is a partnership alternative.

We have to connect the dots, and that requires going beyond our conventional social categories. If you look at categories like right/left, religious/secular, Eastern/Western, capitalist/socialist, you see that there are, and have been, repressive and violent regimes in all these categories, whether secular like rightist Nazi Germany or Stalin's leftist Soviet Union, or religious, like the Eastern Taliban or Isis or the Western rightist-fundamentalist alliance. How we relate to nature is not mentioned in any of them. Moreover, they either marginalise or ignore nothing less than the majority of humanity: women and children. All this makes it impossible to connect the dots and see the contrasting configurations of the partnership and domination systems.

The only social categories in our language that are gender-specific are patriarchy and matriarchy. The message is that either fathers or mothers rule, again, there is no partnership alternative. Our education, both formal and informal, as well as conventional studies of society, have reinforced and perpetuated all this. They too have almost nothing to say about the so-called "feminine" caring, caregiving, or nonviolence, and even our "humanities" marginalise or ignore women and children – the majority of humanity. As Einstein said, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.

NM What are the necessary actions we could take to reconnect our humanity with nature? And how do you attempt this in your own life?

RE I am blessed that I have been able to move from an urban area to live in a place surrounded by green, by trees and by flowers. This choice has made me more aware of nature – and we all need to have this privilege, whether we live in urban or rural areas. Our cities must be

planned and built accordingly, our economic systems must change so everyone can do this, as well as our whole way of thinking about how we relate to one another and nature must change. As I have emphasised, how we relate to nature is not isolated from how we relate to people. This is why my life has been devoted to changing our beliefs and our cultures.

NM Globalization has raised numerous problems not only related to environmental degradation but also animal exploitation, social disparities, the loss of biodiversity and the genocide of indigenous peoples. Has globalization been our downfall?

RE We are all interconnected today by technologies that span the globe. Globalization is a fact of life today, and while there definitely needs to be more localism in areas such as the provision of food and other necessities, I don't think we can, so to speak, put the genie back in the bottle. Besides, think of all the misery before globalization: the chronic inequalities, violence, and human rights violations of pre-industrial, pre-globalised times in our history. The real issue is not getting rid of globalization and retreating to isolation, which, as we see rising today, is again an us-versus-them kind of phenomenon, as is characteristic of regressions to the domination side of the partnership-domination scale, where the only alternatives are believed to be dominating or being dominated. The issue is what kinds of rules govern globalization so we do not see so much environmental degradation, animal exploitation, social disparities, the loss of biodiversity, and the genocide of indigenous peoples.

Here we need the partnership-domination lens to see what we have to do. First, we can then see that every progressive modern social movement has challenged a tradition of domination, from the "divinely ordained" right of kings to rule their "subjects", to the "divinely ordained" right of men to rule the women and children in the "castles" of their homes, to the "divinely ordained" right of one race to order another, all the way to the environmental movement, challenging our once hallowed conquest and domination of nature. These movements, and the consciousness that we can change traditions of domination, led to important shifts, from the abolition of slavery in most of the world to new concepts such as equality and human rights, most recently including women's and children's rights. But the main focus of these movement has been on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: politics and economics as conventionally defined. Far less attention was paid to the foundations on which this pyramid has kept rebuilding itself.

This is why the "Make Partnership Mainstream" movement launched by the Center for Partnership Systems focuses on four cornerstones that are foundational, but have been generally viewed as secondary if they are discussed at all: childhood/family relations, gender relations, a new economics, and stories/language.

We must take into account what we are today learning from neuroscience on the importance for how our brains develop of what children experience and observe in their first years, including the cultural construction of gender roles and relations, the hidden system of gendered values that has informed economics, both capitalist and socialist (consider the enormous damage to our environment caused by both), and our language and stories, especially stories about "human nature".

The last chapter of *Nurturing Our Humanity* describes these four cornerstones, along with actions that can shift them from domination to partnership. I invite readers to join this movement to build solid foundations for a more equitable, less violent, sustainable world.

NM Within global communication, you write that mass media conveys bad news to humanity and that it is time to create a new narrative. What advice would you give to the story-tellers of tomorrow?

RE *Nurturing Our Humanity* details the evidence from both social and biological science (including neuroscience) that we have been told false stories about human nature. Not only did we live in partnership-oriented cultures for millennia; studies today show that the so-called pleasure centers of our brains light up more when we share and care than when we dominate or win.

We need true stories about our past, present, and the possibilities for our future, and our story-tellers, whether in academia, the media, entertainment, education, etc., must tell these stories.

NM Your research has influenced a broad range of disciplines, such as the arts and literature, and here at Udine University the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) conducts multi- and interdisciplinary research based on the partnership/ dominator model within World Literatures in English, Language, Education and Arts. In which ways do you see literature nourishing humanity?

RE Literature can play a huge part in the story-telling and the language needed to shift to a more equitable, sustainable, and caring world. This is why the Partnership Studies Group at the University of Udine is so important. We need many more such programs.

In that connection, I am now teaching at Meridian University, an accredited university in the United States, in an online and in-person program that offers PhD and Masters degrees for Partnership Practitioners, including those working for policies and practices that care for our natural life support systems. For more information, as well as information on online courses offered by the Center for Partnership Systems in which I teach, please go to www.centerforpartnership.org.

Our cultures, from our families and religion to education, economics, and politics – including policies and practices regarding nature – are human creations. Together we can shift them from domination to partnership.

Nunziana Mastrangelo holds a post-graduate degree in European and Extra-European Languages and Literatures from the University of Udine, Italy. In 2015 she conducted research on Aboriginal Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne. In 2017 she won a scholarship to study for a semester at James Cook University (Townsville) and in 2018 she was a visiting research student at the University of Queensland.
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