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## Through-Lines of Domination

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

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In his [opening essay](#), David Christian emphasizes the power and importance of a shared story for humanity. Indeed, a new story about our past and present is fundamental to building a better future. Key to this is an interdisciplinary analysis of *human nature* and *human cultural possibilities*. This piece starts with the first and then focuses on the second.

Findings—largely overlooked—from the natural and social sciences debunk the popular story that we are hard-wired for selfishness, war, rape, and greed. Neuroscience shows that our brain circuits, and therefore how we think, feel, and act—including how we vote—are strongly shaped by our environments, which for humans are primarily our surrounding cultures as mediated by families, education, religion, politics, and economics. Our large-brained species is flexible: we are equipped for destructiveness and creativity, rote conformity and independence, cruelty and caring. Which capacities are expressed, or inhibited, largely depends on the degree to which a culture or sub-culture orients to either end of the partnership-domination social scale. Domination systems produce high levels of stress and fear—from stressful early family experiences to the artificial creation of economic scarcity. Partnership environments enhance the expression of the capacities needed for a more humane and sustainable future: our human capacities for caring, consciousness, and creativity.<sup>1</sup>

The first step is going beyond familiar social categories—ancient/modern, right/left, religious/secular, Eastern/Western, Southern/Northern, industrial/pre- or post-industrial. There have been authoritarian, violent, unjust societies in every conventional category, so none tells us how to build a better future. Moreover, these categories ignore or marginalize parent-child and gender relations—even though neuroscience shows that early experiences and observations profoundly affect how our brains develop, and therefore what people consider normal and moral.

The *partnership system* and the *domination system* show the key role these foundational human relations play in whether a society is more just or unjust, is more peaceful or violent, protects human rights or considers chronic human rights violations normal and moral.

Authoritarian, repressive, violent societies—whether old, like Assyria, Imperial China, or the European Middle Ages; modern, like Hitler’s rightist Germany or Stalin’s leftist former USSR; or religious like Khomeini’s Iran, the Taliban, and the US “rightist-fundamentalist alliance”—share the domination system’s configuration.

First, all institutions, from the family to religion, economics, and politics, have authoritarian, top-down structures. Second, the male human form is ranked over the female form, with a *gendered system of values* in which anything associated with masculinity in domination systems (e.g., conquest, winning, violence) is superior to the stereotypically feminine (e.g., nonviolence, caring, caregiving). Third, abuse and violence are built into domination systems (from child-and-wife-beating to aggressive warfare, from torture and witch-burnings to pogroms and lynchings)—as required to maintain in-group versus out-group thinking and rigid top-down rankings of man over man, man over woman, race over race, religion over religion, and nation over nation.<sup>2</sup>

Societies orienting to the partnership system’s configuration also transcend familiar categories. They can be technologically undeveloped foraging societies going back millennia, as shown by anthropologist Douglas Fry and others; egalitarian prehistoric farming cultures like Catal Huyuk, where archeology shows no signs of destruction though warfare for a thousand years or inequality between women and men; technologically advanced “high civilizations” like Minoan Crete, with its generally high living standard and no signs of warfare between the island’s city-states, where women played leading roles; or modern societies like Finland and Norway.<sup>3</sup>

Partnership-oriented societies have the following configuration. First, both families and tribes or nations are more democratic and egalitarian. There are still parents, teachers, managers, and leaders, but they have *hierarchies of actualization* in which accountability, respect, and benefits flow both ways, rather than just from the bottom up, and power is empowering, rather than disempowering, as in *hierarchies of domination*. Second, the female and male forms of humanity are equally valued, and qualities like nonviolence and care are valued in women, men, and social

and economic policy. Third, while there is some abuse and violence, they are not built into institutions as they are not required to maintain rankings of domination.

Over the last centuries, modern progressive social movements have challenged entrenched traditions of domination—the eighteenth-century “rights of man” movement challenging the “divinely ordained” right of kings to rule; the nineteenth- and twentieth-century abolitionist, civil rights, and anti-colonial movements challenging the “divinely ordained” right of a “superior” race to rule over “inferior” ones; the feminist movement challenging the “divinely ordained” right of men to rule women and children in the “castles” of their homes; and today’s environmental movement, challenging the once-hallowed conquest and domination of nature.

Yet our forward movement has not been linear but upward with dips: fiercely resisted every inch of the way and punctuated by global regressions to domination. A major reason for these regressions is that most progressive movements have only focused on dismantling the top of the domination pyramid: politics and economics as conventionally defined. By contrast, those pushing us back to strongman rule, violence, and in-group vs. out-group scapegoating invest enormous resources in maintaining or reinstating domination in four interconnected cornerstones for either partnership- or domination-oriented systems.

These cornerstones are *family and childhood relations* (e.g., appropriating family, values, and morality), *gender roles and relations* (e.g., demonizing gender role fluidity), economics (e.g., promoting trickle-down economics and devaluing caring, which they code “feminine”), and narratives and language that justify top-down control (e.g., that fathers are “masters of the house”).

Vladimir Putin, who barbarically invaded Ukraine, reduced the legal penalty for family violence several years prior in 2018, so in Russia the consequences for hurting or killing a stranger exceed those for killing or hurting a family member. He and other “strongmen” recognize the connection between an authoritarian, male-dominated, punitive family that uses violence for control and his authoritarian, male-dominated, violently punitive state.

In sum, those pushing us back globally pay particular attention to maintaining or reinstating traditions of domination in our family relations, gender relations, economics, and stories/

language. Progressives need a whole-systems agenda based on a partnership-oriented narrative of our past, present, and the possibilities for our future that no longer marginalizes the majority of humanity—women and children—to counter regressions to domination worldwide and build a more equitable, sustainable, and caring socioeconomic partnership system.

## Endnotes

1. Riane Eisler and Douglas Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (London: Oxford University Press, 2019).
2. Riane Eisler, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics* (San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler, 2007); *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987, 2017).
3. Douglas Fry, ed., *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ian Hodder, "Women and Men at Catalhoyuk" *Scientific American* (January 2004): 77–83.

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## About the Author



Riane Eisler is President of the Center for Partnership Systems and Editor-in-Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*. Internationally known as a systems scientist, conference keynoter, consultant, and attorney working for the human rights of women and children, she is the author of groundbreaking books such as *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*; *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*; and *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future*. She holds a JD from the University of California, Los Angeles. In recognition of her work for a more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable future, she has received honorary PhDs and peace, humanitarian, and human rights awards.

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