

The Power of the Creative Word: From Domination to Partnership by Riane Eisler

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We all know the term “utopia.” It means a place that does not exist – and cannot exist. The word was coined by Thomas More in his 1516 satire-fantasy *Utopia* by combining the Greek *outopia* (no place) and *eutopia* (good place). So “utopia” reinforces the idea that a better society is impossible— that, literally, it is no place.

We need a different word to describe the vision of a better future that does not relegate it to the realm of the impossible. The reason, as linguistic psychologist Robert Ornstein explains, is that words channel our thinking. As he writes in *The Psychology of Consciousness*, every society’s language provides categories that mold consciousness, and these categories play a major role in how we view the world—and how we live in it. Indeed, how we see “reality” is to a large extent determined by the verbal categories we are taught. This is why we must replace utopia with a word that presents a better future as a real possibility.

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, I propose *pragmatopia*—from the English “pragmatic” and “practical,” and the Greek *topos*, or place. Pragmatopia means possible place. It describes our world as we shift from *domination systems* of top-down rankings—man over woman, person over person, nation over nation, religion over religion, race over race, and humankind over nature—to *partnership systems* where beliefs and social structures support relations based on partnership, on mutual respect, mutual benefit, mutual caring.

Domination systems and *partnership systems* are also new words introduced through my research and writings, and now also through the work of many others. These new terms, too, are essential tools for building a less violent, more humane, equitable, and caring world.

Societies in every one of our conventional categories—such as religious vs. secular, Eastern vs. Western, leftist vs. rightist, capitalist vs. communist, industrial vs. pre-or-post-industrial— have been violent, repressive, and uncaring. Communism was going to make the world better, but Lenin’s Russian Revolution and Mao’s Cultural Revolution brought more violence and repression. Both the former Soviet Union and China have dismal environmental records. Capitalism and “free trade” certainly are not an answer: they too are trashing nature’s life-support systems as well as re-concentrating wealth and power in a new reincarnation of feudal fiefdoms on a global scale: the mega-corporation. Replacing Western secularism, science, and technology with Eastern religion, or returning to pre-scientific Western times does not offer solutions either. Indeed, Eastern religions have supported caste systems, violence, and rigid male dominance; the Western religious Middle Ages were repressive and often brutally violent; and today’s fundamentalist religious cultures, both Eastern and Western, are creating some of our planet’s most serious problems.

Small wonder then, that many people today are discouraged, alienated, and cynical. If the progressive modern social movements have been unable to change patterns of

violence and inequity, the argument goes, our problems must stem from human nature. We must be fatally flawed by original sin, selfish genes, or some other unalterable defect.

However, if we look at modern progressive movements not as failures, but as incomplete, there is realistic hope for the future. We can then explore what our next steps should be and get on with the most important human enterprise: constructing social systems that support rather than inhibit and distort our enormous human capacities for consciousness, caring, and creativity.

Categories and Consciousness

To create new realities, we need new words: social categories that describe new possibilities.

Categories describing societies are particularly important because they either expand or constrict our consciousness of what is possible. For instance, as long as people believed monarchies were the only possibility, that is, until the “divinely ordained” right of kings and princes to rule their “subjects” was challenged and words such as “democracy” and “republic” gained currency, they could not move to a different political system.

Categories such as republic, democracy, capitalism, socialism, and communism expanded the scope of our thinking. But none of these social categories describe the totality of the institutions, assumptions, beliefs, relationships, and activities that constitute a culture. Neither do older categories, such as Eastern or Western, rightist or leftist, liberal or conservative.

Religious/secular and Eastern/Western describe ideological and geographic differences. Right/left and liberal/conservative describe political orientations. Industrial, pre-industrial, and post-industrial describe levels of technological development. Capitalism, socialism, and communism describe different economic systems. Democratic/authoritarian describe political systems in which there are, or are not, elections.

None of these categories addresses the most important question for our future: *What configuration of beliefs and institutions—from the family, education, and religion to politics and economics—will support relations based on mutual respect, accountability, and caring, rather than top down rankings backed up by fear and force?*

Answering this question requires more comprehensive social classifications. These are provided by the new categories of the *domination system* and the *partnership system*.

Unlike earlier classifications, the domination system and the partnership system take into account all social relations. Rather than focusing only on relations in the so-called public sphere of politics and economics, these categories take into account the central importance in molding our attitudes and behaviors of the primary human relations—the formative childhood relationships and the relations between the male and female halves of humanity.

Social categories that give real attention to the cultural construction of these primary relations are essential to better understand – and change – societies. We have long known from social science that it is through what they experience and/or observe in

these relationships that children first learn what is considered normal, inevitable, and moral. Today we know from neuroscience how fundamental these relationships are. We know that our brain's pathways are largely laid after birth, especially in childhood. So these early experiences and observations affect nothing less than how our brains develop!

What a society considers normal in these formative gender and parent-child relations teaches us to either respect the human rights of others or to view human rights violations as normal and even moral. It also teaches us important lessons about violence. When children experience violence from parents or others in their families and schools, or observe violence against their mothers, they learn that it is acceptable, even moral, to use force to impose one's will on others – a lesson that is then easily carried over into tribal, national, and international relations.

Moreover, if children grow up in families where females serve and males are served—and, as is still the case in many world regions, where females get less food and health care—they learn to accept economic injustice in all spheres of life. Even beyond this, if the male half of humanity is considered superior and entitled to dominate the female half, children learn to equate difference—beginning with the fundamental difference in our species between males and females—with superiority or inferiority and dominating or being dominated. They can then apply this template for relations to all other differences – be they racial, religious, ethnic, and so on.

In sum, social categories that fail to make us aware of how a society constructs the formative childhood and gender relations limit our consciousness. And this limited consciousness makes it impossible to see connections that are essential if we are to build solid foundations for more peaceful and equitable relations – from intimate to international.

Two Basic Social Configurations

No society is a pure domination or partnership system. It is always a matter of degree. But using the analytical lens of the partnership/domination continuum, we see connections that are not visible through the lenses of old social categories. Once we take into account how a society constructs the roles and relations of the female and male halves of humanity and their relations with their daughter and sons, we see that behind the social categories we have been taught are two underlying social configurations that repeat themselves cross-culturally and historically.

Hitler's Germany (a technologically advanced, Western, rightist society), Stalin's USSR (a secular leftist society), Khomeini's Iran (an Eastern, religious society), and Idi Amin's Uganda (a tribalist society) were some of the most brutally violent and repressive societies of the twentieth century. There are obvious differences between them. But they all share the core configuration of the domination system. They are all characterized by:

1. top-down rankings in the family and state or tribe maintained through physical, psychological, and economic control;
2. the rigid ranking of the male half of humanity over the female half;
3. a high degree of culturally accepted abuse and violence—from child- and wife-beating to pogroms, terrorism, and chronic warfare;
4. stories and beliefs that present these kinds of relations as normal, desirable, and even moral.

The partnership system has a different core configuration:

1. a democratic and egalitarian structure in both the family and the state or tribe;
2. equal partnership between women and men;
3. a low degree of built-in violence, as force is not needed to maintain rigid rankings;
4. stories and beliefs that do not idealize, normalize, or eroticize domination and violence

The partnership configuration also transcends categories such as ancient or modern, rightist or leftist, religious or secular, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, and so forth. Cultures that orient to the partnership configuration can be tribal, such as the Teduray of the Philippines studied by the University of California anthropologist Stuart Schlegel. They can be agrarian, as are the Minagkabau of East Sumatra studied by the University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday.

Partnership-oriented societies can also be industrial and postindustrial. Indeed, much of modern Western history has been characterized by movement toward the partnership side of the continuum – albeit against fierce resistance and periodic regressions.

Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland are the modern nations that have moved furthest to the partnership side of the continuum. These are not ideal societies, but their beliefs and institutions support respect for human rights in families and in the family of nations. They are democratic cultures without the large gaps between haves and have-nots characteristic of domination systems. They have laws prohibiting physical punishment of children and a strong men's movement disentangling "masculinity" from domination and violence. They have much more equal partnership between women and men, with women playing important leadership roles: women constitute approximately 40 percent of legislatures and a female head of state is not an anomaly in these nations.

This higher status for women and their representation in top political leadership has direct effects on social policy. These nations fund universal health care, elder care, childcare allowances for families, and generous paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers. In other words, along with the higher status of women comes greater support for stereotypically feminine traits and activities such as nurturance, nonviolence, and caregiving. This is an important social dynamic: as the status of women rises, men no longer consider it such a threat to their status or "masculinity" when they also embrace more "soft" stereotypically feminine values, and vote for more caring policies.

These more partnership-oriented societies also show that this more caring economic system is economically effective. Nordic nations are regularly in the top tiers of not only the United Nations Human Development Reports but also of the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Reports.

Indeed, studies show that the status of women is one of the best predictors of a nation's quality of life and economic success. Already in 1995, a study conducted by the Center for Partnership Studies, "Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life," compared statistical measures from 89 nations on the status of women with measures of quality of life such as infant mortality, human rights ratings, and environmental ratings. It found that in significant respects the status of women can be a better predictor of quality of life than Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Since then, other studies have verified the relationship between the status of women and a society's general quality of life and economic success. In 2000, the *World Values Survey* focused attention on attitudes about gender for the first time. Based on data from 65 societies representing 80 percent of the world's population, it found a strong relationship between support for gender equality and a society's level of political rights, civil liberties, and quality of life.

More recently, the annual World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Reports* show that the nations with the lowest gender gaps (such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland) are also nations that are regularly in the highest ranks of the World Economic Forum's *Global Competitiveness Reports*.

Making the Invisible Visible

Unfortunately, if we only look at conventional economic treatises, none of these social and economic dynamics are visible. So our job is to make the invisible visible. Changing our language, including the categories we use to describe social systems, is integral to this vital enterprise. We can change societies once we understand that how a culture structures the primary human relations is foundational to its entire system of beliefs and values.

For example, it is not coincidental that the rightist-fundamentalist-corporatist alliance in the United States first came together as a powerful political block around a "women's issue"—the defeat of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Nor is it coincidental that —be it Hitler in Germany, Khomeini in Iran, the Taliban of Afghanistan, or the rightist-fundamentalist alliance in the United States – regressive regimes or would be regimes give top priority to "getting women back into their traditional place" in a "traditional family, a code word for an authoritarian family where women are subordinate and children learn that it is extremely painful to question orders.

Those trying to push us back to the "good old days" when most men and all women still "knew their place" in rigid rankings of domination recognize the social importance of these primary relations. Yet ironically, many people working for democracy and equality still think of "women's rights" and "children's rights" as secondary. And this despite the fact that the UN reports that violence against women and children is the most widespread human rights violation worldwide.

Progressives too need a new integrated political agenda: a politics of partnership that makes protecting the human rights of the majority—women and children—a top social priority. I lay out this integrated political agenda in my book *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships that Will Change Your Life*. We need a new educational agenda, as I propose in *Tomorrow's Children: A Blueprint for Partnership Education in the 21st Century*. I also propose a new economic agenda in my most recent book, *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*.

In addition, we need a new linguistic agenda, as I will briefly sketch below. The first step is raising awareness of how even our language has trapped us into thinking that dominating or being dominated are our only alternatives. At the same time, we must replace words and usages that reinforce domination with new words and linguistic structures that promote and support partnership.

A striking example of linguistic patterns we must make visible is how the subordination of female to male is perpetuated by the languages we inherited from more rigid domination times.

In English, this subordination is perpetuated by the use of masculine nouns, such as “man” and “mankind,” and pronouns, such as “he” and “his,” as generic terms that supposedly include women and girls. This usage teaches us, both consciously and unconsciously, that women do not really count.

This problem is even worse in languages such as Italian, Spanish, and French, where the grammar itself as presently constructed constantly reminds us that men and the masculine are more important than women and the feminine. In these languages, nouns are either of the masculine or feminine gender. In Spanish, for example, a male citizen is a “ciudadano” while a female citizen is a “ciudadana.” So a group comprising only female citizens would be called “ciudadanas.” But if the group includes even a single male, the plural becomes the masculine “ciudadanos.” And it gets even worse. For instance, “parents” translates as “padres” (fathers), a human being is “hombre” (man), and so on.”

The same is true in Italian and French. For example, children who speak these languages also learn early on that, when the subjects of a sentence are both feminine and masculine, the feminine is so unimportant that the nouns and adjectives of the sentence only recognize the masculine. So the French say “les hommes et les femmes sont beaux” and not “les hommes et les femmes sont belles.”

The good news is that these usages are today being challenged, not only by women but also by men. An example is the 2012 article “Linguistic Sexism and the Visibility of Women” (“Sexismo lingüístico y visibilidad de la mujer”) by Ignacio Bosque co-signed by 26 other academics. This article powerfully makes the point that, whether we want to or not, by not changing these grammatical rules, we teach children, and ourselves, that men and boys are so much more important than women and girls that the masculine can just make the feminine disappear.

Some languages are even more sexist. For example, the traditional Japanese usage requires that women use a different linguistic form, that is, a completely different construction that immediately signals their deference and inferiority when addressing men.

There is also, as psychologist Lethea Erz writes in “The Challenge of Language: Teaching the Language of Partnership,” the important matter of nonverbal communications. For instance, in rural Uganda to this day women have to kneel when addressing a man – vividly communicating that men are not only women’s superiors but women’s lords and masters, just as kings and chieftains are rulers over “subjects” who also were traditionally required to kneel before them.

Erz has written extensively about sexist language. She notes, for example, how animal names are used to describe males and females in very different ways. Words describing women are often degrading or sexualized (chick, dog, shrew, pig, beaver, old crow, bunny, bitch, bat, fox, hen, vixen, cat, kitten - usually paired with “sex”). By contrast, those applied to men frequently reflect power, virility and cunning (buck, bull, stag, stallion, wolf). Erz also notes how the religious language we are used to likewise

equates power with males rather than females through exclusively male terms such as God, Allah, Father, Lord, and He.

Erz further asks us to consider questions such as: Why are our most obscene oaths and expletives so often words for female sex organs or violent acts of domination? In a partnership-oriented culture, what would be considered sacred, and how would we discuss it? Would a supreme being be gendered at all, and would only males have access to priesthoods?

Again, the good news is that there is growing consciousness of the insidious ways in which domination language shapes how we think, feel, and act. Out of this consciousness has come some forward movement – for example, the substitution for “man” and “mankind” of gender neutral terms such as “human” and “humankind,” and the use of “she or he,” “he or she,” “s/he,” and other inclusive pronouns rather than the supposedly generic “he.” Another example is the growing use of the title “Ms.” rather than “Miss” or “Mrs.” as a parallel for “Mr.” – since neither “Mr.” nor “Ms.” provides information about an individual’s marital status. Still another example is how the women’s spirituality movement has gained some ground in restoring the feminine divine; for example, persuading some religious denominations to use more inclusive language such as “Divine Mother” and “Divine Father,” as well as some progress in reinstating women’s access to priesthoods.

But we have a long way to go. Not only has progress been slow and uneven in changing non-inclusive domination language; there has also been a backlash. For example, many U.S. publishing houses required nonsexist inclusive language during the 1970s. But since then, many books have been published again using “man,” “he,” “mankind,” and other non-inclusive terms.

Progress has been even slower in coining new words that better fit with a partnership rather than domination way of life. For example, the old categories of “matriarchy” and “patriarchy” persist, giving the false impression that our only alternatives are systems dominated by either women or men.

In *The Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure*, I detail evidence from archeology and myth showing that, rather than having been matriarchies, prehistoric societies where women were not subordinate to men were actually societies where women and men were more equal partners. This evidence further indicates that the original direction of civilization was more in a partnership direction.

To describe this kind of society in gender-specific terms, *The Chalice and the Blade* also introduces the neologism *gylany* as the real alternative to patriarchy. The *gy* in *gylany* comes from the Greek word *gyne* or woman; *an* comes from *andros* or man, and the letter *l* comes from the verbs *lyein* or *lyo*, which have double meanings: to solve or resolve (as in analysis) and to dissolve or set free (as in catalysis). In English the *l* also stands for linking rather than ranking.

This takes me to an important point. I have used “partnership system” or “partnership model” rather than *gylany* in many of my writings because it is a readily familiar term that quickly communicates the concept of equal and mutually beneficial relations. However, the term “partnership” has drawbacks.

In the first place, without further explanation, partnership does not immediately communicate the importance of gender relations. Another issue is that to some people partnership implies cooperation and that the distinction between the partnership system and the domination system is that people only cooperate in the former. Still another is that the term partnership system can be interpreted to mean a completely flat organization in which there are no hierarchies.

However, the reality is that people cooperate all the time in domination systems. People in monopolies, terrorist cells, criminal gangs, lynch mobs, and repressive government regimes all cooperate to dominate others. Moreover, a partnership system is *not* a flat organization. We human need hierarchies: we need parents, teachers, managers, leaders.

But here again we need new terms to make important distinctions. This is why I coined the new terms *domination hierarchy* and *actualization hierarchy*; with power defined and used as *power over* in the former but as *power with* and *power to* in the latter. In other words, in partnership systems, power is used to empower rather than disempower others. And the fact that the term “empower” is gaining currency is still another sign of forward movement.

The Language of a More Caring Economy and Society

As I noted above, while domination system and partnership system communicate vital distinctions, neither shows the critical importance of how gender roles and relations are socially constructed without further explanation. This is why in *The Chalice and the Blade*, in addition to *gylany* I also use the term *androcracy* (rule by men).

I plan to use these terms more now because if they are utilized enough, they will eventually enter our language – as happened with words like “sexist,” “racist,” “ageist,” and “homophobic,” which are all relatively recent inventions.

Once new categories in our languages are created, used, and internalized, they become lenses through which we perceive “reality.” As noted earlier, none of the language (or lenses) we have historically used to define broad-scale human interactions highlight the foundational importance of the primary human relations: the gender and childhood relations where people first learn what is normal or abnormal, moral or immoral, possible or impossible, valuable or not valuable. By contrast, *partnership system*, *domination system*, *androcracy*, and *gylany* make it possible to see patterns: configurations that repeat themselves cross-culturally and historically. They also make it possible to see how our guiding systems of values still carry a heavy domination stamp.

Consider, for example, how political priorities are often determined by a gendered double standard in which anything stereotypically associated with women in domination systems – such as caring, nonviolence, and caregiving – is seen as secondary. Consider also how the “soft” or “feminine” is still generally viewed as ineffective and impractical – when, in reality, as documented in *The Real Wealth of Nations* and a growing number of other works, the opposite is actually the case.

We already saw how Nordic nations are regularly in the top tiers of not only the United Nations Human Development Reports but also of the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Reports – precisely because they instituted more “soft” caring policies.

A growing number of studies also show that companies with more caring policies have a higher return to their investors, as detailed in *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*.

Again, “caring economics” is a new term that people are not used to hearing. In fact, many people are shocked to see caring and economics together – proving how effectively we have been socialized to accept that uncaring values should drive economic systems.

Of course, we need more than words. We need actions. So I want to end this article with examples of three action-oriented programs.

The first is the *Partnership Studies Group* (http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195) at the University of Udine in Italy, the only international research center on partnership studies currently active in Europe. Conceived and directed by Professor Antonella Riem, who has also been a leading force in the recent re-publication of my books *The Chalice and the Blade* and *Sacred Pleasure* in Italian by Forum Editrice, the *Partnership Studies Group* is composed of scholars from different universities that carry on significant research and study on *partnership* in world literatures (in English, French, Spanish) and in the education of young people both at school and at university levels.

The second program is one I helped initiate through the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS): the Caring Economy Campaign (CEC). The CEC offers the public, businesses, and governments information that shows the efficacy of policies such as universal health care, high quality child care, paid parental leave, stipends to help families care for children and the elderly. Working with economists and other experts, the CEC is developing new “Social Wealth” indicators as supplements/alternatives to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the conventional measure of “economic health.” The CEC also offers interactive online Caring Economy Leadership Programs (CELP), and its Caring Economy Coalition has to date brought together organizations representing 14 million people. More information is at www.caringeconomy.org,

The third, which I co-founded with Nobel Peace laureate Betty Williams is the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV), dedicated to bring a strong moral voice to ending the global pandemic of violence against women and children that is still often justified on religious or traditional grounds. Again, “intimate violence” is a new term that encompasses a range of violence – from child and wife beating, genital mutilation, rape, sex trafficking, and child sexual abuse to giving girls less food, healthcare, and education still common in some world regions. SAIV uses its website at www.SAIV.org as well as articles, meetings, conferences, and media to show that intimate violence takes more lives than all the wars and revolutions that receive so much media, public, and policy attention – and to highlight the connection between intimate and national and international violence.

I invite readers to join in these programs – and to create your own. I also invite you to join in creating and using the new language of partnership.

While new words are not enough, they are essential tools for building a better society. Without them, we remain trapped in the language we inherited from earlier more domination-oriented times – language designed to normalize rankings of domination.

Just as “capitalism” and “socialism” became part of our economic language, and “free speech,” “civil rights,” “human rights,” and later also “women’s rights” and “children’s rights,” became part of our cultural vocabulary, if we join together we can see to it that the new partnership terms we create become tools to change not only our language but also our realities.

This will not happen overnight. But if enough of us join together, we can make it happen.

Partnership language: a viable alternative to sexist/racist/ageist language through which the partnership values of respect, care, and love are expressed. Words can be used to describe equal linking between men and women, rather than rankings of inequality, thus shifting from domination to partnership. Here are some further examples of terms we can all use from “Understanding the Language of Partnership: A Glossary” by Stefano Mercanti, Ph.D. at www.partnershipway.org

Partnership education: a multidisciplinary and integrated approach to helping human beings acquire the tools, knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to live their lives in empathic and gender-balanced ways in harmony with each other and with nature. There are three core-components: *content* (what we teach), *structure* (where we teach), and *process* (how we teach).

Partnership intelligence: a term coined by Rob Koegel to delineate the skill and capacity for partnership, and the potential for expressing partnership awareness. Partnership intelligence does not conceive of the self as separate from others but recognizes that they are both rooted in relational connections and can be enriched by them. Accordingly, it fosters the capacity to fulfill needs *with* others rather than *at* their expense (dominator intelligence).

Cultural transformation theory: according to Riane Eisler, history is the result of the interaction between two evolutionary movements: the first is the tendency of social systems to develop from primitive to complex organizational forms through technological *phase changes*; the second is the movement of *cultural shifts* between two basic models for social and ideological organization which she defines as *androcracy* (domination) and *gylany* (partnership). Her theory is congruent with the analysis of systems philosophers like Ervin Laszlo that the world today is at a crucial bifurcation point in history, and that a further shift to a partnership model can effectively contribute to a system breakthrough.

Gylany: the term is composed of the Greek prefix *gy-* (*gyne*, woman) and *an-* (*andros*, man) linked by the letter *l* for *lyen* (to resolve) or *lyo* (to set free), to indicate that the female and male halves of humanity are linked rather than ranked.

BCE: in order to promote partnership values, “BCE” or “Before the Common Era,” is used instead of the patronizing “BC” in respect of all world spiritual and religious beliefs. The same is true for “CE” instead of “AD.”

Caring connection: one of the most basic of human drives. It refers to the notion of interconnectedness seen not only as a spiritual expression but also rooted in biology. It highlights that what human beings do in this lifetime is meaningful as it advances the evolution of humanity as a species and fulfils their responsibilities to the planet.

Centers of care: a term coined by Nel Noddings to delineate how a person extends one's capacity for care, which can be focused for instance on self, intimate others, associates, acquaintances, distant others, animals, plants and the physical environment, on objects, instruments, and on ideas.

Actualization power: the power to nurture, to support, to create and to accomplish things together (*power with*) as opposed to the power to dominate, to inflict pain and destroy (*power over*) within the dominator model.

Women's work: stereotypically feminine activities such as taking care of children, caring for people's health, or maintaining a clean and healthy home environment—categorized as less valuable than “men's work” according to the economics of domination—activities that in the partnership model, are considerably valued and honored by both sexes as caring work, and recognized as the most economically productive work.