

A Real Reason to Get Out of Bed in the Morning: Riane Eisler's *The Real Wealth of Nations*

As you open your eyes on another day of global warming, tribal and regional conflict, and general transnational chaos, it will feel wonderful to have Eisler on your team, sharing her straightforward prescription for planetary rescue.

~ Deb Reich in *The Baltimore Chronicle*, April 2007

Do you ever open your eyes in the morning and think, Oh, wow, why bother...? If so, you'll be glad to hear that macrohistorian and cultural transformation theorist Riane Eisler has just delivered another massive and exhilarating dose of hope for the sane and weary, with the publication of her latest book, [*The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*](#).

In [*The Chalice and the Blade*](#), her 1987 introduction to “partnership” as the leitmotif of sane social engineering, Eisler persuasively argued that nonviolent, egalitarian, culturally advanced and prosperous societies have existed in the past and could certainly be made (by us) to exist again. For folks who instinctively reject the existential Hobbsian choice between aligning with the oppressor/elite/privileged few and aligning with the oppressed/underclass/disadvantaged masses in this crazy, violent world, that book was a tonic: a powerful injection of legitimacy for the humanist-feminist-pluralist worldview that there has to be a third way.

Like a window opening suddenly to admit a rush of fresh air into a stale and dismal cell of choicelessness and powerlessness, *The Chalice and the Blade* made an immediate and powerful impact with its promise of achievable social change via a partnership orientation at all levels. Eisler's additional writing since has created a valuable canon of partnership literature aimed at educators, parents, school systems, activists, researchers and the general reader.

Now comes *The Real Wealth of Nations*, tackling the ominous gaps in our mental map of what economic theory is all about. An economy is more than the market, the government, and the military, says Eisler, eventually citing chapter and verse from a long list of other scholars to create a very persuasive case. A complete picture of a national and global economy must include the whole range of vital caring and caregiving activities—mostly undervalued, undercounted, and either severely underpaid or totally unpaid; and mostly performed (surprise!) by women—that take place in the community and in the home. Eisler, a meticulous cross-disciplinary researcher, presents a good deal of cheering evidence to fortify her recommendations. What we spend to maximize the value of so-called human capital, for example (i.e., caring for and educating our children and youth), should be considered not a burdensome expense but a capital investment, insists the

author; and as such, it should be amortizable over twenty years—the time frame for nurturing a generation of healthy, high-performing human beings.

To back that up, she presents research outcomes showing that, e.g., early childhood educational interventions produce a 200 percent return on investment, and that actual companies that have adopted a comprehensively caring orientation to their workforce more than recoup their considerable investment in health care, exercise facilities, onsite child care, parental leave, and so forth, with better motivated employees, lower turnover and training costs, and higher productivity. The cases cited come from enlightened regions like the Nordic nations, where social policy is light-years ahead of nearly everyone else's; but even in the USA, where the publicly funded social safety net now consists of way more holes than netting, there are already numerous companies profiting over the long term from this kind of investment in caring and caregiving.

In fact, the phrase “caring and caregiving” must occur about a thousand times in the ten chapters of this book (the final chapter is called “The Caring Revolution”), and evidently that's no accident. By the time you get to the last page, you can no longer imagine a serious policy or planning environment in which the phrase “caring and caregiving” is not heard continually as an intrinsic component of the discussion. Indeed, that is precisely Eisler's point.

You will find here references to a body of new economic theory created by innovative thinkers whose names are not yet household words everywhere.

One of the book's key strengths—that the writing is accessible to any literate reader—may not please everyone. The discussions range from the most basic (who Marx and Engels were) to the quasi-academic. On the other hand, even Eisler's thumbnail recounting of the development of socialist theory is enlightening and entertaining, because her take on reality is so different from what you'll find in almost any other comparably wide-ranging discussion of economics. (How many authors who tell you in a few hundred words about the history of socialism would devote any of that to telling you a little about the personal lives of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels? Did you know that Engels not only became Marx's “lifelong friend [and] working partner” but also “the sole economic support of Marx, his wife Jenny, and their children”?)

More to the point, perhaps, you will also find here references to a body of new economic theory created by innovative thinkers whose names are not yet household words everywhere (Lourdes Beneria, Duncan Ironmonger, Nancy Folbre, Scott Burns, Julie Nelson, Kilkka Pietila, Ann Chadeau, Julie Aslaksen, Charlotte Koren – notice how many of them are women...). Some have proposed workable new economic measures that incorporate rather than ignore the value of unpaid household-based labor, and other important innovations.

Later, when in a discussion of the uses and abuses of technology, Eisler mentions Buckminster Fuller (and the notion that technology is mainly about brains and hands), I had that warm “aha!” feeling. She goes on to discuss technologies in terms of their outcomes: technologies of life support (farming, weaving, construction); technologies of

actualization (music, art, education, child care, representative democratic politics); and technologies of destruction (from the first warrior knife to the latest bacteriological warhead). In attempting to reverse the existing trend toward investment in the third type at the expense of the first two, says Eisler, we will need a new set of political-economic guidelines; this new school of thought she proposes to call “partnerism.” The idea is so appealing, I may have to abandon my principled opposition to “isms.”

Eisler clearly hopes to inspire the reader to take some concrete action to help promote local, national, and global economic restructuring in the direction of partnerism. She provides a long list of pertinent organizations, people and books. This will be useful to readers not previously involved in this kind of work, as well as to longtime activists, who may discover a fruitful new lead or two.

For about the price of a good vegan (or steak) dinner, you can order *The Real Wealth of Nations* in hardcover. This is one time when I wouldn't wait for the paperback edition. Your alarm will buzz again at the usual time tomorrow morning. As you open your eyes on another day of global warming, tribal and regional conflict, and general transnational chaos, it will feel wonderful to have Eisler on your team, sharing her straightforward prescription for planetary rescue: a lot more serious, high-level, long-range attention to the crucial economic role of caring and caregiving, and a thoroughly partnerist orientation, starting right now. Today.

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