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## Review of Eisler's "The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics"

Thomas F. Head

*George Fox University*, [thead@georgefox.edu](mailto:thead@georgefox.edu)

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## **The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics**

Riane Eisler. 2007. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. ISBN: 978-1-57675-388-0, \$24.95.

*Reviewed by Tom Head, George Fox University.*

**A**ny writer who uses a variation of Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* for her own book title sets a high standard. She poses as one who will offer a new magnum opus, a pioneering work that will so shift our thinking that the discipline of economics will never again be the same. Has that standard been met? Time will tell, but my initial judgment is that Riane Eisler does not achieve the goal. She nonetheless has written a significant and provocative book.

The author's name is likely to be familiar to readers with a general interest in social thought. Twenty years ago she published *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, a book that has become a classic in the literature of gender, power, and society. It should not be difficult to find a faded red paperback copy of *The Chalice and the Blade* on the bookshelf of a colleague in psychology, sociology, gender studies, or perhaps even on your own bookshelf. In that treatise, Eisler first articulated what she calls Cultural Transformation Theory, and its two models for understanding the structure of society and culture. The "partnership" model is one which links people in cooperative, caring ways, while the "dominator" model subordinates and devalues some, especially women and the feminine.

In *The Real Wealth of Nations*, "chalice and blade" meet "supply and demand" as Eisler attempts to apply her earlier insights to the not-so-modest task of changing how we think about economics and how we structure the economy. The ten chapters ramble around quite a bit. Chapter one, "We Need a New Economics," and chapter two, "Economics Through a Wider Lens," offer a logical enough beginning. Her discussion of economic maps and the distortions of models that leave out or undervalue the natural economy, the household economy, and what she calls "the unpaid community economy" offer a necessary and workable foundation for enlarging economics. However, chapters three ("It Pays to Care—In Dollars and Cents") and four ("The Economic Double Standard") are at best side excursions, with ultimately little value added.

In chapters five through seven, she gets back on track and focuses on the core of her argument by analyzing the economic components of the contrasting cultural paradigms of domination and partnership. These three chapters, along with the first two, are the intellectual meat of the book and

will be of most interest to social scientists wishing to project her grand theory into a research agenda. Chapters eight through ten are forward looking, first reflecting on technological change and the nature of work, next assessing where we are in our understanding of human behavior and organizational change, and finally ending with her thoughts on what each person can do in this caring revolution.

Overall, the book is a noble effort to bring perspective to a confusing array of global economic realities: a planet threatened, millions impoverished, devastating wars, healthcare crises, alienation, etc. As Eisler sees things, we human beings long to do good work, to care for ourselves, for each other and for the planet, and yet we often feel caught in a system that makes these good things so hard to achieve.

Eisler reaches deep into history, culture, and the human psyche to diagnose our economic dilemma and its intransigence. For her, what ails us can be understood only if we examine the beliefs, habits, and social structures that come out of the dominator-oriented cultures. The male-superior and female-inferior views inherited from domination have had disastrous effects on humanity. Some are obvious, but much of what she has to say about the damage of domination is not so obvious. It is buried in our unconscious minds, and a new understanding of economics, for Eisler, must begin with discovering and revealing unrecognized habits, values, and beliefs.

The alternative to the waste and misery of a dominator-oriented culture is the care and nurture of a partnership-oriented culture. For Eisler, the important debates in economics are not about capitalism versus socialism, market versus planning, or private versus public. They are about domination versus partnership, a distinction that cuts across schools of thought and political orientations. She sees modern economics as perpetuating the dominator story by not considering and measuring our caring—household work, childrearing, unpaid community service, and environmental stewardship. For her, the matter of relationships, and whether or not there is domination or partnership in the relationship, is the critical element in developing a new story for economics, a story that will move us toward a world in which we adequately care for ourselves, each other, and the earth.

As Eisler puts it, “this imbalanced system of values is deeply entrenched in our unconscious minds. Most of us aren’t even aware that much of what we value and devalue—and thus our economic system—is based on a system of gendered values. As a result, the devaluation of caring—and the real-life consequences for us all—remains largely unrecognized” (p. 42). And, of course, just tinkering with old economic models will not



suffice. This book really is an exercise in broad social thought as well as an occasion for the integration of religious perspectives and economic thought. Sadly, on this last point, Eisler seems unaware that there are thoughtful scholars whose lives have been devoted to such work. While she sharply captures ways in which the church has contributed to the dominator ills with which we struggle, she fails to explore how it might be the case that our flawed spiritual traditions might contain not only the problems but also the solutions.

For professional economists, and perhaps especially Christian economists, the temptation will be to dismiss this book as naïve, simplistic, and not even very well informed of the basics of economic theory. Yet, I think she offers some stimulating thought in a few areas. Specifically, what she does contribute can play a role for those working within broader social models and attempting to integrate the social sciences. Also, her demand that we *truly* build the natural economy into our economic models is essential, and, while she does not exploit this opportunity, it is a clear occasion to bring faith and science together in economic thought and practice.

For non-professional readers, Eisler's greatest appeal might be her call to informed activism. She invites the reader to be aware, to be awake, to be truly conscious of what we are doing. She believes that a truly flourishing and functional economy is possible and that personal action is part of that story. This is all for the good. But I would warn the non-professional reader not to depend too heavily on Eisler for an understanding of what the discipline of economics might contribute. Her critique of economics is just too uneven and idiosyncratic.

And for both professional and lay audiences, I will voice one last frustration. As much as I welcome Eisler's insights or perhaps *because* I welcome her insights, I was disappointed that there is so much redundancy in the book. She has a habit of repeating herself. For example, she needlessly recites again and again the problems with using national income accounts as measures of well-being; most informed and interested readers would know about this issue already and would not need to be reminded of it more than once. *The Real Wealth of Nations* would have been a much stronger book had it been edited into a clearer, better organized, and more forceful treatise with considerably fewer pages.

While, from my own perspective, Eisler's book did not come close to the standard of being a new *Wealth of Nations*, she nonetheless contributes unique and important ideas to the conversation. Whoever does author the new *Wealth of Nations* will need to consider Riane Eisler's challenging questions about caring for people and the planet.



## **References**

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