



June 2019

## A Caring Economy Is Key

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Climate Movement: What's Next?](#)

Riane Eisler

There is growing recognition that climate change and other environmental threats are the result of a fundamentally imbalanced socioeconomic system. I believe that to bring about systems change and effectively address climate change requires a closer look at the question of *change from precisely what kind of system to what kind of system*.

### **“System Change, Not Climate Change”?**

There have been, and are, oppressive, violent, and environmentally destructive societies that are capitalist and socialist, rightist and leftist, religious and secular, Eastern and Western, etc. So moving to a more equitable and environmentally sustainable system requires going beyond such categories. The partnership-domination social scale reveals cross-cultural and historical connections that are not visible through the lenses of conventional analyses or familiar social categories.

From the perspective of the partnership-domination social scale, critiques of capitalism as unjust and exploitative of people and nature are actually critiques of domination systems. Today’s “trickle-down economics” is a replay of domination traditions where the normative ideal is the old “conquest of nature” and, as in feudal times, those on the bottom are to content themselves with the scraps dropping from the opulent tables of those on top. As for socialism, its two large-scale applications (USSR and China) led to yet another domination system of top-down economics, brutal suppression of freedom and human rights, and huge environmental problems.

It should not surprise us that neither of these old economic systems can help us effectively address climate change or other environmental crises. Capitalism and socialism came out of early industrial times, and we are now in the postindustrial age. But both are not only antiquated; both perpetuated traditions of domination, be it of people or of nature. Nature was there to be exploited, and men's rule over women and children in families was the norm. As a result, women and their work of caring for people, starting in early childhood, and keeping a clean home environment were legally the property of their husbands. In today's economics schools, caring for people and for Mother Earth is still classified as "reproductive," not "productive," work.

This gendered system of values is further perpetuated by current economic metrics. GDP includes activities that harm and take life. Not only are selling guns and cigarettes, as well as their resulting health and funeral costs, on the plus side of these metrics, so, too, are the results of climate change such as remedial work after increasingly powerful storms and floods. All this is treated as "productive" – while the work of people who care for children, the sick, the elderly, and others in families and keep home environments clean and healthy is not included—despite studies showing that if the household work of caring for people and keeping a healthy home environment were counted, it would be 50 percent of the reported GDP.

We cannot realistically expect caring policies that promote human well-being and protect our natural environment if we do not change the gendered devaluation of caring. As other contributors to this discussion note, people tend to respond to climate change emotionally and unconsciously. This is the result of socialization to fit into domination systems, conditioning people to identify with the "strong" head of household (precursor to the "strongman leader" in the state or tribe), and to believe what he calls "reality"—such as denial that climate change is real, that it is caused or exacerbated by uncaring human activities, and that we must give value to investing in caring for our life-support systems.

Changing deeply entrenched biases is a long-term enterprise. That said, there are short-term actions we can take, such as using new metrics that empirically show the economic value of the work of caring for people and nature. For example, Social Wealth Economic Indicators include environmental conditions as well as levels of health, education, and poverty; give attention to the status of women and children as predictors of both quality of life and long-term economic

success; and show what kinds of investments (inputs) make for better economic, environmental, and social results (outcomes). These indicators can also guide policies to break through seemingly intractable cycles of poverty, given the well-documented fact that the majority of the world's poor are women (who do care work for free or for poverty wages).

As automation, robotics, and artificial intelligence replace jobs previously performed by people, we have the opportunity to redefine what is and is not “productive work.” Policies that support caring for people and nature can be funded by taxing activities that harm and take life and contribute to climate change—for example, substantially taxing weapons, cigarettes, short-term trading in stock markets, and activities damaging to our natural environment. Through today's technologies of destruction and exploitation, traditions of domination may lead to our species' extinction. But we can change our course and bring about a Great Transition if we focus on root causes rather than symptoms—and bring together the many groups and people who in bits and pieces are working to shift from domination systems to partnership systems.

---

## About the Interviewee



Riane Eisler is President of the Center for Partnership Studies and Editor-in-Chief of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies. Internationally known as a systems scientist 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* and *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*. In recognition of her work, she has received honorary PhDs and peace and human rights awards. She holds a JD from the University of California, Los Angeles.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Riane Eisler, "A Caring Economy Is Key," contribution to GTI Forum "The Climate Movement: What's Next?," *Great Transition Initiative* (June 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/climate-movement-eisler>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.